

**THE
DEVIL
IS A
PART-
TIMER!**

18

SATOSHI WAGAHARA

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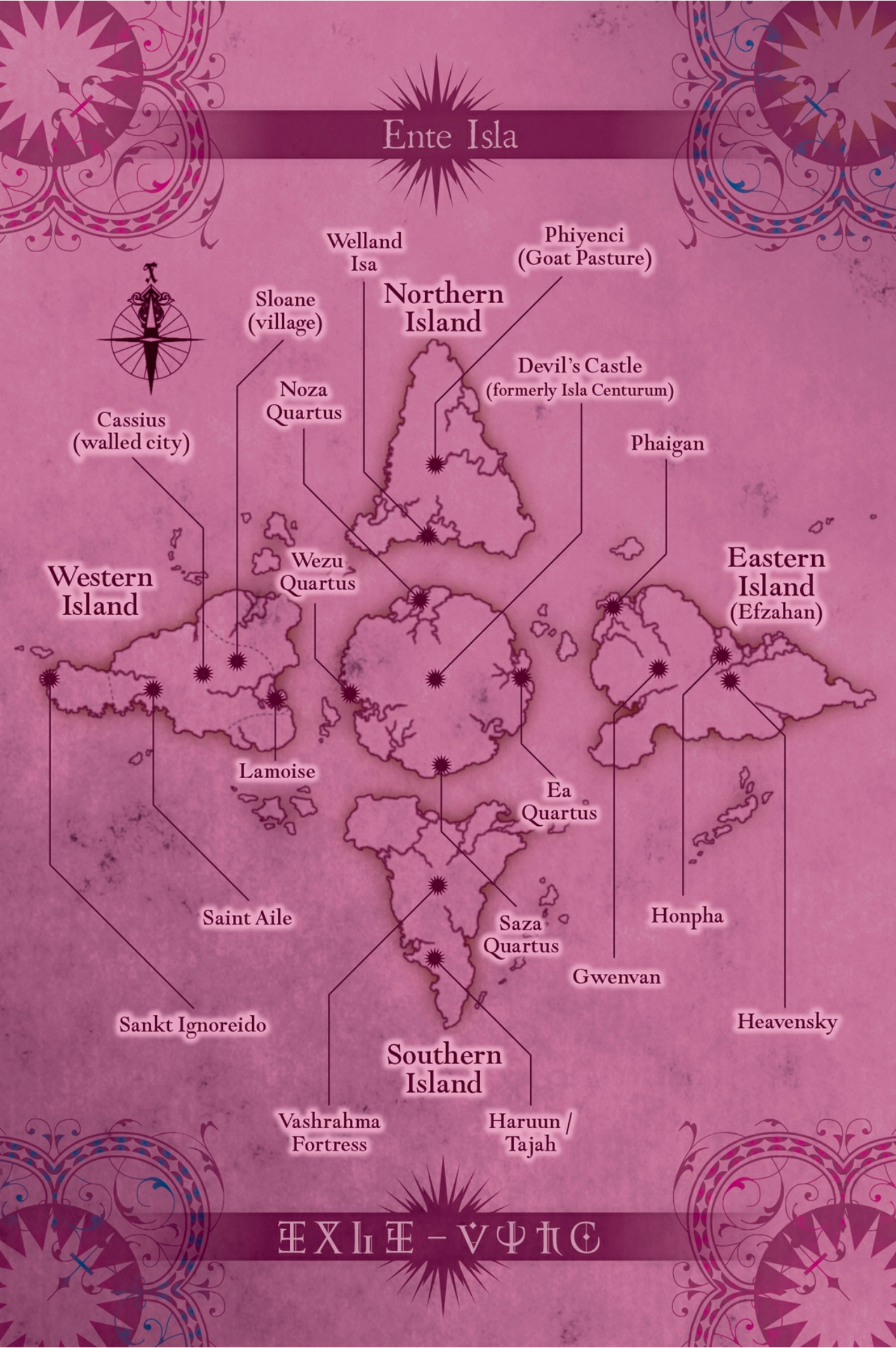
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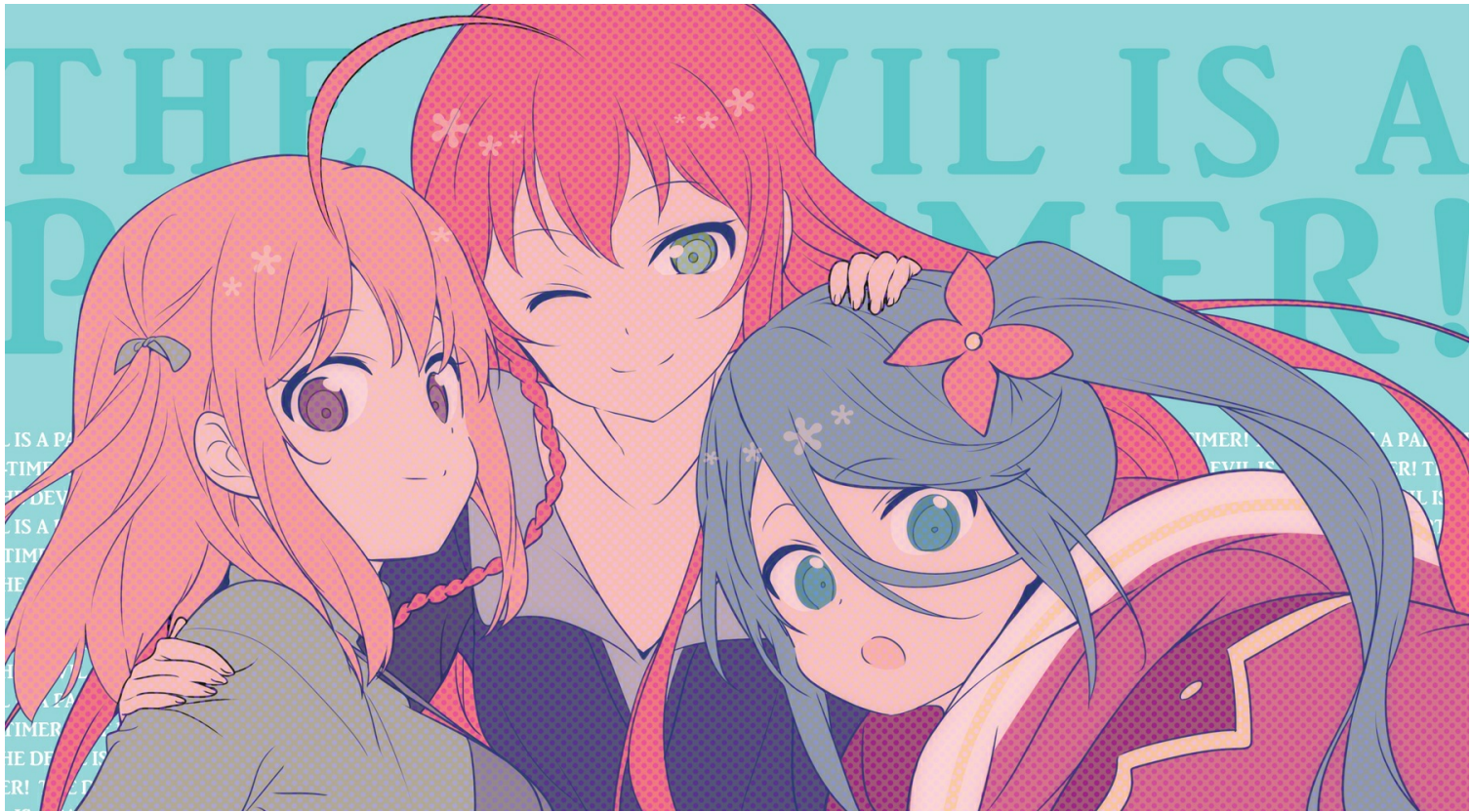




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THE DEVIL IS A PART-TIMER!, Volume 18

SATOSHI WAGAHARA, ILLUSTRATION BY 029 (ONIKU) Translation by Kevin Gifford

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**THE
TEENAGER
STARTS
IMAGINING
BEYOND
TOMORROW**



THE TEENAGER STARTS IMAGINING BEYOND TOMORROW

Six bowls, each filled with steaming white rice, sat atop the basic *kotatsu* in the tatami-mat room. They were accompanied by miso soup, dried fish, pickled veggies, and a side salad. It was the stereotypically ideal Japanese breakfast, and it was being enjoyed by six people at once.

“Chiho,” one of them said, “what about after that?”

Chiho Sasaki gave Suzuno Kamazuki’s anxious question a serious nod. “He looked the same as always. I felt like he wasn’t as talkative as normal, but after something like *that*, I couldn’t blame him.”

“Ms. Sasaki,” a sorrowful-looking Shirou Ashiya stated from next to Suzuno, “I do have to apologize for always making you worry. Quite a number of things happened to us all at once as well, you see, and at the moment, we’re finding it difficult to handle.”

“Well,” Chiho said, turning her eyes away a little, “again, I can’t blame you. I know just how difficult that whole situation was. Really, I feel bad that this is about all I can do for you. I wish I could be more help right now—”

She was cut off by another voice ringing out from next to her—one much more boundlessly cheerful than the others.

“You all are so *gloomy*! Look, I *know* you’re not the kind of high-strung girl who’d get depressed over something like this, mm-kay? You’re not starving yourself, are you? It’s the new school year now—your third and last year of high school, right? If you get preoccupied with going on a diet or whatever, your head’s gonna stop working! So ya want some more rice?!”

Chiho winced as she looked at him, then pointed at the rice bowl in front of her.

“Gabriel, can you stop acting like I’m some kind of emotionless robot?! And

yes, please!”

“Ah, so you *do* still have an appetite, my pretty little miss? Hang on one sec!”

The figure in a large apron, muscles practically cascading over his T-shirt, was neither Maou, nor Emi, nor Urushihara, but the archangel Gabriel, currently responsible for guarding Devil’s Castle on the Ente Isla side.

“Feh,” sighed the man seething next to Chiho, deftly handling his chopsticks despite the pair of enormous claws extending out from each of his hands. “Coming here has made me realize that angels lack any sort of principles whatsoever. It amazes me that humans actually worship them.”

“Enough of that, Farfarello,” Suzuno said with a chuckle, looking at the head Malebranche chieftain across from her. “*That* is not who we worship. It is the *concept* of angels, one could say.”

“I’m not a ‘that,’ you know. Some holy cleric you are... Y’all have enough rice?”

Albert Ende stuck his bowl out. “Fill me up, Gabriel. Pile it high.”

“Yeah, yeah, here you are.”

“Still,” Albert continued upon receiving a small mountain of rice, “funny how all these problems seem to be croppin’ up at once. It’s damned fishy, if you ask me.”

Everyone except Gabriel greeted this observation with grave faces.

“Indeed. I do hope my liege is eating well enough... Between dealing with the wounded Lord Camio, Kinanna, and Urushihara to boot, I fear he is reverting to bad dietary habits.”

“That wasn’t exactly my main concern, y’know...”

“I brought him a few things when I came here,” Chiho replied, reacting neither to Albert’s whining nor to Ashiya’s placing Urushihara in the same class as a magical chicken and a wizard-lizard. “That, and I think Nord is providing him with some assistance, too. Plus, with everything that happened, Kinanna is acting a lot better now.”

“Again, his diet ain’t... Ahh, forget it.”

It was the same Ente Isla Devil's Castle as always, but right now it was hosting a rather odd assemblage of six people. Just a bit ago Sadao Maou, the lord of all demons, and Emi Yusa, his nemesis, had both tasted defeat at the hands of a single solitary figure. At roughly the same time, danger from Ente Isla's Western Island had begun to threaten both Devil's Castle and the Devil King's Army. Apart from Gabriel's usual easygoing manner, this summit—featuring all the main leaders of the mission to defeat heaven for good—was an extremely somber one.



In the midst of this struggle—with the ultimate goal of rescuing Alas Ramus's brothers and sisters from the angels in heaven—Sadao Maou had failed in his quest to become a full-time staffer at MgRonald, the greatest mission of his life in Japan. Almost simultaneously, Kinanna—the Lenbrellebelve with the Astral Gem, the final item needed to send Devil's Castle hurtling toward heaven—appeared in the middle of Yoyogi Park. Thanks to his extremely advanced age, Kinanna's memory was cloudy, forcing a Maou already reeling from his workplace defeat to provide what was essentially elder care for a senile lizard.

Emi Yusa, his nemesis, and Chiho Sasaki, his would-be true love, were both concerned that losing this chance would drive Maou back to his old demonic ways. But before they could figure out how to address this, they volunteered to help keep a close eye on Kinanna instead.

In the midst of all this, Mayumi Kasaki—the manager at the Hatagaya MgRonald, who worried over Maou's future for other reasons—had received a transfer to another location, deciding to accept it in hopes of using the experience to open the restaurant of her dreams in a few years. She had invited Maou and the archangel Sariel to join her opening staff for the future venture of her dreams, an offer Sariel readily accepted. Maou also agreed to it on the condition that he be a free agent until then, which did much to put Emi's and Chiho's minds at ease.

It was now clear that Maou had a strong drive to keep up his life in Japan. They were no longer in danger of parting company after the war with heaven was over.

Now it was simply time to wage that war.

In order to ensure that the Astral Gem truly was within Kinanna's body, a party of demons, humans, and more (specifically, Maou and Emi, with Alas Ramus and Acieth Alla housed magically within them; Emi's mother, Laila; and Maou's adoptive parent, Camio the Devil Regent), had all traveled to the demon realms en masse. There, within an underground complex Kinanna apparently used as his lair, they discovered a strange machine that sapped them of their demonic force and confirmed that Kinanna and the Astral Gem were one and the same—and that the relics the Devil Overlord Satan left behind still had some secrets to them.

As this unfurled, a mysterious figure in an astronaut suit—the same who'd appeared in the skies above the Western Island of Ente Isla—came up to them once more. The face and the body were hidden, but at the very least, the assailant was clearly hostile. It took Alas Ramus and Emi's holy sword with ease, bringing Laila to her knees along the way, and only the fists of the out-of-control Acieth could do anything against it. The fact that an enemy existed that not even Maou and Emi could defend themselves against deeply disturbed Laila. On top of that, even more terrible news arrived at the Ente Isla Devil's Castle: Robertio Igua Valentia, head of the group of Six Archbishops that ruled over the Church, had died—and the four remaining members of the cabal had each received divine visions from the angels to send their armies of knights to the Central Continent.

Everything related to the battle against heaven seemed to be falling apart, blocked by massive walls that rose out of nowhere. It was a serious shock to the Devil King's Army, and Maou and his team still had no effective countermeasures.



“That said, at least nothing terrible happened to my liege or anyone else.”

“I'm keeping a careful eye on all of them! Alas Ramus is fusing back into Yusa all right again. She's really relieved.”

“Yeah, she is, but that so-called astronaut...that's the same person who meddled with us on the Eastern Island, isn't it?” Albert noted. “You wouldn't know somethin' about that, would you, Gabriel?”

“Ulp...”

Gabriel’s whole body tensed.

“Did you just say ‘ulp’?” Chiho asked, exasperated.

The angel shook his head. “Look, you might not believe me, but—”

“No, I don’t.”

“Don’t lie.”

“You’re hiding something, aren’t you?”

“Spit it out.”

“I tell you, these angels...”

“I haven’t *said* anything yet!” a disheartened Gabriel fired back. “I know this is gonna sound like a lie, but I swear I don’t know anything about that.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Quit lying.”

“You *are* hiding something.”

“I want you to spit it out.”

“I tell you, these angels...”

“*Hey!* I’m not lying! And I’m not deliberately omitting the truth or anything, either, mm-kay? I really don’t know! Albert’s talking about when the Devil King and I were fightin’ in Heavensky, right? And anyone with holy force got sucked into the sky, whether angel or human, yeah? I’ve never *seen* anything like that before! It’s true! Trust me!”

The other five weren’t fully ready to accept it—Gabriel had proven himself to be a highly unreliable witness—but at the very least, it was clear he had no useful information to offer.

“Geez, guys... It’s true...”

Gabriel could still feel how unconvinced they all were. But he knew how he had acted up to now. He couldn’t defend himself very strongly.

“But no matter who it was, it definitely came as a shock to Maou and Yusa.

According to Urushihara, it made Maou start to worry about all kinds of things. That's why he stopped watching Kinanna too carefully."

"Yes. And even if Lucifer only gave you half the story, as he usually does, it is clear between that and his failed promotion that the Devil King has difficulty accepting failure."

Chiho couldn't deny Suzuno's take. "Yeah, most of his efforts have resulted in success for him so far, so I think it stings a lot. Plus, Ms. Kisaki is leaving our location, so things are all kinda up in the air. He might be pretty tired."

"That's rather bad news... Even if we do have Laila and Amare with us, Kinanna is a bit of a monster. He may be a demon, but he shows no respect for His Demonic Highness's grandeur. But since he is clearly from the time of the Devil Overlord, it is not a good idea to be careless handling him."

"A monster...?"

"That is rather fair to say. Judging by what *used* to be my backyard garden, he is capable of wielding rather high-level demonic force."

That force leveled the vegetable garden Suzuno had going behind the Villa Rosa Sasazuka building. The thought of it made Suzuno stare off into the distance.

"If my liege and Lucifer have their hands full," Farfarello stated, "would it not be better to return Kinanna to Ente Isla? Our demonic force is like poison to the humans of Japan, is it not?"

"Yeah, true enough. But dependin' on what the Church does, having a giant ball of demonic force on *this* world could cause a lot of headaches. At least you guys can be reasoned with. That lizard's lost his marbles, right? We prod our foes the wrong way, they might decide to hurry up that demon extermination on the double, y'know?"

"Hrmph... Humans are such irksome creatures..."

After the death of Robertio, the remaining Archbishops each had a "revelation," one that posed a stark threat to everyone in Devil's Castle right now. As it went: *Another evil is gathering anew, in the center of the world. All good people, it is time to come together, rise up, and slay this evil.* To Ente

Islans, who didn't have to trace their memories far back to recall life under the Devil King's Army, the meaning couldn't be easier to grasp. Clearly, the surviving demonic forces were preparing to rise again in the Central Continent. Things were already coming to a head, and the leaders here couldn't afford to overlook any information they could find.

What's more, the events that occurred with Alciel and the Malebranche on the Eastern Island were now known to the leaders of many nations. The threat of the Devil King's Army may have faded, but the fact that demons still lurked in certain corners of the world was an all-but-public secret. That was why, to both the leaders here and to all Ente Isla, the area around the former Isla Centurum in the Central Continent was a delicate hotspot.

The Federated Order of the Five Continents had already blocked off the urban areas of Isla Centurum. The Saint Aile knights led by Rumack and Emeraldal, the Reconciliation Panel clerics led by Suzuno, and the Knights of the Eight Great Scarves from the Eastern Island were all stationed around Devil's Castle to guard this region, each in their own way. The Federated Order had never been near Devil's Castle before, but the fact that Ashiya and his team had prepared for their heavenly battle without arousing suspicion for several months was thanks to the hard work of these groups. The castle was, essentially, hidden from the world.

But that cease-fire had ended after the Archbishops' revelations. And while they had taken measures to expand and strengthen the no-man's-land around the castle, they had to assume they were now being observed from afar, either physically or with holy magic. No one had sent out any magical sonar bolts yet, perhaps to avoid prodding them, but even now, at the exact moment, they could be out there, waiting.

When it came to Kinanna's enormous, uncontrollable demonic force, a talented sorcerer could easily detect it without even using sonar. That was reason enough why Kinanna was a danger—whether in Ente Isla or Japan, albeit for different respective reasons.

"Now, General Bell, when do you believe this holy force of humans or whatever will make their move, exactly?"

“Physically speaking, it is impossible for the Church forces around the world to move very quickly. But we do not have months on end to work with. They will be sent in waves, I am sure—and if so, even optimistically speaking, I cannot give us more than two months.”

“Two months? Seems like a long time, even though it’s not.”

“That is when all-out war will break out; it would not be unreasonable at all to expect the initial skirmishes before then. The Federated Order stationed in the Central Continent’s four large cities already has a fairly large contingent of Church-affiliated knights.”

Even before the Devil King’s Army came along, the capital of Isla Centurum was the literal center of everything in the Continent. However, there were four other autonomous regions in the land, centered around the cities of Noza Quartus on the northern edge, Saza Quartus in the south, Ea Quartus in the east, and Wezu Quartus on the west side.

Noa and Ea Quartus, left relatively undamaged by the war, had been primarily responsible for maintaining order on the Continent. The Federated Order, established to help rebuild the land, had bases in all four cities, and among each of them was a small, but noticeable cadre of Church-affiliated soldiers. Whether negotiations between them and the Order went well or not, they had little time to work with.

The moment they received news of the revelations, Emeralda Etuva and Hazel Rumack hurried back to their homelands at top speed. They needed to keep a very close eye on both the Order and the Church departments in their nations; not a single stone could be left unturned. And Suzuno would need to do the same shortly.

“How long can we extend our time limit?” Ashiya asked.

Suzuno winced. “Consider the figure I quoted to be the result of things going as well as possible with Lady Emeralda and General Rumack’s work.”

“Then things are starting to sound rather desperate.”

Suzuno nodded, looking to Chiho. “What is more, we should keep contact and travel between here and Japan to a bare minimum. Our Devil King’s Army has

been able to take its time so far in part because the Federated Order is an unruly mob, too focused on its internal squabbles to function very well. But if they pick up on the presence of Japan, or any powerful transfer of force via Gates or Idea Links, even they would take action. Things are far worse than when you were kidnapped, Alciel.”

Her describing it as “*our Devil King’s Army*” made Ashiya and Chiho smirk a little.

“Yes,” Ashiya replied, “it could expose Sasazuka and Japan to danger. I understand the forces to the south, in particular, have brought the internal strife of Haruun with them in words and deeds. I could very much see them plunging into Japan in their panic to act.”

The Knights of the Eastern Empire, enticed by the angels to do their bidding, had sent an army into Sasazuka once before. Devil’s Castle could rely on the assistance of Miki Shiba and Amane, but Ashiya and Suzuno both agreed that they couldn’t afford to cause any more trouble for Japan.

“I know Gate spells can be trouble, but what about using an angel’s feather pen?” Chiho offered. “That doesn’t use up a lot of holy or demonic force.”

Suzuno thought over that for a moment. “If we have to connect to Japan, I suppose it will be via the feather pen for now. It’ll be a burden on the demons...”

She looked at the demons in the room, knowing they were unable to take advantage of the feather pen. But Ashiya didn’t look fazed.

“That is fine. For now, His Demonic Highness’s presence is not required here, and Urushihara has been tasked with caring for Kinanna. I have no reason to return to Japan for the moment, either. But if we are talking about using Laila or the feather pen, wouldn’t any angel activity potentially expose ourselves to the Church? I think discovering angels would only encourage them.”

“Quite the opposite,” Suzuno said. “They would grow more careful. It takes a massive amount of time for them to even recognize angels, or miracles, or gods or the like.”

“Yeah, and I wouldn’t want them to start worshipping the fake we got *here*,

either...”

“If someone like *this* is an angel, I can understand why they would like a replacement.”

“Aw, Alciel, don’t be so mean, mm-kay?” Gabriel said. “And why does everyone here keep calling me ‘this,’ or ‘that’? I can cook better rice with this camping gear than anybody *else* in your army...”

It would likely be better for the Church’s worshippers if the angel that descended and lived among them were a somewhat holier presence than one bragging about his campfire cooking skills.

“It is fair to say,” a dejected-sounding Suzuno murmured, “that this Church deployment is going to be one of the largest in history. Even though only four of the Six Archbishops are alive, dealing with an event as large and unprecedented as this will require a great deal of time to achieve consensus about. But among the four, if Archbishop Cervantes takes the initiative, nobody will stop him.”

“Cervantes Reberiz... The youngest of the Six Archbishops. He apologized to Saint Aile back when Emeraldalduva was put on trial, did he not?”

“A nasty one, he is,” Albert spat. “That whole thing was completely the Church’s fault, but he still negotiated things such that there were almost no hard feelings afterward. He’s nasty, but capable. Saint Aile’s in no position to defy the Church too much, but still, that’s something.”

The insulting tone of Albert’s voice indicated how tricky dealing with him would be.

“And after losing two old, crafty foxes in the form of Olba and Robertio, he almost immediately regained control as well. Quite a man,” Ashiya noted.

Albert gave the demon a look. “You think now’s the time to compliment him? The Church is our enemy—”

“It is not. Not yet.”

“...I swear, you demons are just as much a pain as humans,” Albert grumbled, shrugging a bit. Farfarello feigned ignorance of the callback.

“Regardless, large Church deployments as these—they are called ‘crusades’ in

our history—can only be declared once every part of the plan is determined to be fair by Church standards,” Suzuno interjected. “The Reconciliation Panel is responsible for evaluating this, and as its leader, I must be in attendance for that to happen. I doubt I will be able to return to Devil’s Castle before things begin to move.”

“Hell, I’m impressed you stayed in Japan for as long as you did. Eme was green with envy over that, lemme tell you.”

“That is how peaceful things used to be,” Suzuno despondently replied. “Nothing serious enough to require the head of the Reconciliation Panel took place. If it was possible, I would have wished to stay there for good.”

“Yeah? Well, why don’t you just quit your job after the war’s done with?” Albert asked easily, completely untroubled. “Maybe Eme could appoint you to a post somewhere.”

“Well, I have great responsibility. It would need to be the right time to do it, and I would need to consider my successor. Retirement would not happen in a single day...but I will consider it among my next steps, yes.”

Suzuno meant it as a casual reply, but it still made an astonished Chiho glance over them both.

“Your...next steps?”

But it was spoken too softly for either of them to notice.

Devil’s Castle loomed high in the Central Continent. The square of tatami mats placed in front of its throne held a *kotatsu* with six bowls. Six people around it were discussing the future right now. Chiho, neatly sitting in front of her bowl among them, turned her face downward.

“I will try to find a way to stay in contact without an Idea Link. The human forces among us, I will leave under the care of Albert. They will be yours to lead when I am gone.”

“If you *and* Emeralda *and* Rumack are gone, that is one serious handicap. I don’t know how much Albert and I can do alone.”

“You will have to.” Suzuno smiled, feeling forlorn but determined. “You will

have to...or else we cannot make Alas Ramus's dream come true."

"Yes. You're right."

Ashiya nodded and stood up.

"Try not to be reckless."

"You too."

The leader of the Reconciliation Panel and the Great Demon General preferred to keep it simple when discussing worldly trends, as if they were back at the Villa Rosa Sasazuka outdoor landing discussing the shopping they had to do.

"And you, Chiho... I apologize for leaving when things are as difficult as they are. I am sure things are busy enough already at school and your restaurant."

With that, Suzuno took out her feather pen.

"Take care of the Devil King for me...and Japan."

"A-all right. Sure. Be careful, Suzuno..."

Chiho's reply seemed to reassure the cleric. She gave her a light smile as she stepped away from the tatami space and pointed the pen toward the Devil's Castle throne. Then, never looking back, she dived through the opened Gate, the remaining five people in the chamber looking on with mixed feelings.

Ashiya, standing up, walked to a throne-room window and looked down at the scene far below. The trees of the Central Continent were largely evergreens, not changing much with the seasons, but as Ashiya recalled, they were about to greet the second April of their time in Japan, the place Suzuno voiced a desire to return to. He thought about the events leading up till now, and the two months waiting for them ahead.

"Now," he whispered, "what will we have for dinner tonight?"



It was April first, the start of the business year in Japan, and while winter's cold was a thing of the past, it still couldn't be described as warm quite yet.

Three figures, their shadows looming far taller than the average person, were

walking along 100 Trees Avenue toward Sasazuka Station. They were Chiho, with her classmates and friends Kaori Shoji and Yoshiya Kohmura, making their way home from a little spring break practice.

“Carrying them around like this,” a slightly sweaty Kaori said as she brushed away the hair sticking to her forehead, “sure makes me glad we can leave these at school usually.”

“Yeah,” an equally sullen-looking Yoshiya replied. “Like, where am I gonna put this? My room’s a total mess.”

“They told us before spring break that we had to take them home today. What were you doing this whole time?”

“Hey,” he protested, “you don’t realize how long these things are until you have to carry them around all day. Last time I brought mine home, it almost touched the ceiling. I just remembered I thought the same thing last year, actually.”

Chiho nodded at this griping. Their bows were normally stored at the school’s archery range, where they usually stayed unless they had a competition to attend. But during spring break, the range—and the rest of the school—was closed off for cleaning and ant extermination, forcing the students to take all their personal effects out of the building.

“At least these don’t weigh all that much. I bet this sucks even worse for the kendo club.”

“They have to take all that kendo equipment home? Don’t they store their armor sets in big bags with their names on them? It’s not like they’d get lost, would they?”

“Well, they’ll have outside people all over school grounds. They just wanna make sure nothing gets damaged or stolen.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“At least we don’t have to take these home every day. By the way, Sasaki, why did you take your bow home a little while back?”

She had done so right before spring break in order to attend the zirga to

choose the next Chief Herder of Ente Isla's Northern Island. She was part of the event's archery competition—her first time as champion, in fact, although she got a *lot* of help from others. But, of course, she already had an answer worked out for this question.

“Like... I felt like the bow was sounding funny at practice that day. I was worried that it was broken or something, so I went and had the shop look at it. I wanted to buy some new arrows anyway, so I wanted to make sure my bow was a good match for them.”

That much was true—she splurged on some new arrows for the zirga. And she *did* go to the shop, although that was after the tournament. During the Bowman's Offering, the ceremony presided over by the zirga's victor, she had to use a bowstring meant for short targets to fire at one a good 325 feet ahead of her. Between that and the Yesod fragment-driven force coursing through her bow, she had put a lot more stress on it than usual. So she took it in for inspection just in case, and the staff assured her that it was fine. It made Chiho marvel at the strength of modern fiberglass bows, and once she bought some new string to replace the one she wore out, the zirga was now firmly in her past.

Regardless of that, however, Chiho had already given that version of the story to her parents. It was easy for her, since it was ninety percent the truth anyway, and they swallowed it. Kaori and Yoshiya showed no signs of doubting her either, but their reactions were quite different from Mom and Dad's.

“Huh. So you're gonna keep doing *kyudo* in college, Sasaki?”

“...What?”

The unexpected question caught Chiho by surprise.

“Yeah, I bet,” Kaori said. “You got a pretty expensive bow, after all, and it's not like you're working hard at any other sport. If the college has a facility for it, you'll probably wanna keep going, huh, Sasachi?”

“...Um, yeah, that's true,” came Chiho's slightly delayed reply.

“New arrows, though, huh? I guess our final competition's coming up soon... Maybe I oughta buy some, too. I bet any college *kyudo* program is gonna be

way more serious than the tiny team we got. I made sure all my college choices have programs, so...”

Then it dawned on Chiho. They were in their last year of high school. Their career in Sasahata North High’s *kyudo* team could last for as little as three or four more months. They did have one final competition ahead, but if Chiho was purchasing new equipment at this point in time, it’d be natural for her friends to assume she wanted to continue archery after that. If anything, they were at the point where “after that” would’ve been Chiho’s main consideration.

“But since we’re third-years, we’re gonna have to submit our plans for future schools and stuff right after the break, aren’t we? That’s such a pain. Why can’t they just use what we submitted last year?”

“Because of people like you. You haven’t failed any tests, but it’s not like you’re head of the class or anything.”

“Hey, I doubled my English scores.”

“Oh, nice, bragging about going from a 25 to a 50...”

“Ahh, I’ll be fine. I’m not tryin’ to get into the University of Tokyo or anything. I’m going to a test prep center, too. Once I get serious, it’ll be easy.”

That was another surprise for Chiho. “Oh? You’re doing test prep, Kohmura?”

“Well, I’m a college applicant,” Yoshiya casually replied. “Gotta start studying sometime.”

This apparently wasn’t news to Kaori.

“Yeah, yeah, starting April, right?”

He hadn’t actually attended test prep yet, a fact Kaori threw in to put Yoshiya back in his place. It didn’t faze him at all—but seeing Yoshiya engage in the kind of behavior anyone in their last year of high school would do honestly shocked Chiho. And Kaori was already paring down her list of potential colleges.

So what am I doing?

Whether they knew how flummoxed Chiho was or not, Kaori and Yoshiya kept pelting her with surprises.

“Also, not to rain on your parade or anything, but you should stop saying stuff like ‘once I get serious’ and so on. It makes you sound stupid. If that was *really* true, you would’ve been getting serious *before* you said or thought that.”

“Sasakiiii! I don’t wanna take any exams! Shoji’s ruining my motivation, man!”

It was classic Yoshiya and Kaori banter. But to Chiho, they somehow felt miles ahead of her.

“Kohmura, I think you’ll get a lot farther in life if you listen to what Kao tells you,” she said.

“Oh, stop that, Sasachi!” Kaori countered. “Then he’ll blame *me* for it if he screws it up!”

“Dude! Shoji?! I’m not *that* low!”

“If you’re saying ‘once I get serious,’ then you can’t get much lower, I don’t think! Get the picture already!”

“Sorry, sorry. Calm down, you two.”

Chiho stepped up to calm Kaori before she hit Yoshiya with her bow, even as she mentally examined herself. She was in her third year of high school. She had college exams—and after that, college. It had been in her schedule book; she had talked about it many times. It was something looming right ahead of her, but in all likelihood, this was the first time it honestly felt *real*.

I made sure all my college choices have programs, so...

Kaori said something similar when college talk came up last year, but the way she said it now, the words had concrete meaning to her. It had grown from a wish to a full-fledged plan. If she hadn’t selected universities with a *kyudo* program, if she hadn’t looked at her grades and figured out a general idea of where she needed to focus her studies, she wouldn’t have started “narrowing down” schools in the first place. Maybe that was why she needled Yoshiya about acting like he was already smarter just because he’d signed up for a test prep center.

But what about herself? What choices had she made? *I want to do this, not this; I have to do this, or that; I hope it turns out like that, or this*—there were

so many potential avenues, but what was she *doing* about it?

“Sasachi?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“.....”

They were trundled along by the crowds to the Koshu-Kaido road. Sasazuka Station was right in front of them. She looked toward the skies above Villa Rosa Sasazuka—still not visible from here, being on the other side of the railroad tracks. She had just been tremendously anxious about the future of her life, but in terms of what she *could* make out from her current vantage point...

“...Ughh...”

She let out a sigh.

The topics discussed during their breakfast summit at the Ente Isla Devil’s Castle the other day crossed her mind. What the Devil Overlord left behind. Kinanna growing to huge size. All the Church forces possibly bearing down on the Central Continent. Her friends, searching for a way to stop them. They discussed whether Kinanna’s rampage had set off a wave of explosive demonic force, or if the area around Villa Rosa Sasazuka would see warfare following the heavenly forces’ advance, or whether there’d be full-scale war between the Church and the Devil King’s Army in Ente Isla. It seemed so unreal, but it could all happen. Chiho was likely the only teenager in the world concerned about Tokyo really being attacked by a giant lizard.

She had all these ridiculous, yet unignorable anxieties in her mind. It would be reckless to continue on with normal, commonsense plans for the future...or it should have been.

“What’s with this...?”

The words fell out of her mouth. She closed it tight, concerned that Kaori and Yoshiya heard her. Fortunately, Yoshiya must’ve shot off his mouth again, because Kaori was busy hitting him in the back of his head. Neither of them was paying attention to her.

Chiho felt a little apologetic toward them. Everyone had feelings they couldn’t

say aloud, but not being able to confess her emotions to two of her own friends felt kind of like she was betraying their friendship. But if she said, “I’m too afraid of a *kaiju* attack to focus on studying,” they’d start to worry about her for completely different reasons, so she had to keep quiet. The thing was, she likely couldn’t even bare her soul to Maou or Emi, either. It might just add to the pressure and put them in a bad mood.

But when she thought up to that point:

“Ah.”

She realized there *was* someone she could share her feelings with—or at least someone who’d understand her takes loud and clear.

“Okay, guys, see you at the next meet. I got work after this.”

“Oh, sure...”

“See you. *Ughh*, I don’t want to study...!”

Chiho walked toward Hatagaya, her pace hurried. She had enough time to drop her bow off at her house, but she wanted to solve the anxieties in her mind as soon as she could. She took out her phone.

Watching Chiho zoom away, Kaori shook her head, looking a tad lonely.

“.....”

“Shoji?”

“Nothing,” Kaori said, eyes still looking Chiho’s way. “It just holds you down, doesn’t it? Trying to take everything on yourself.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Let’s go home.”

Kaori motioned to Yoshiya to cross the street with her.

“Yoshiya?”

“Hmm?”

“Study for real, okay?”

“What’s with you?”

“I’m worried. The moment I take your eyes off you, you try to take the easy way out.”

“Wha?”

The sight of Yoshiya giving her a quizzical look annoyed her enough that she decided to say what she had been hiding for too long.

“Yoshiya, if you don’t have any particular favorite school, why don’t we go to the same one together?”

“.....”

Kaori detected a moment of silence from him. *Wait. Is he gonna misinterpret what I meant?* She could feel her face starting to redden from the neck up.

Then came the delayed refusal. It floored her.

“Nah, I can’t.”

“Huhh?” she shouted. “Why not?!”

A trace of sadness crossed Yoshiya’s face as he looked ahead, nose in the air.

“I’d never get in.”

Kaori was floored again.

“Like, when I joined the test prep center, I took a mock exam for the level of schools you’re looking at, and...I got rated an E. Totally out of range.”

Kaori could feel something smoldering in her mind, even as she kept it cool on the surface. Why did Yoshiya use her list of schools as a guide? How did he know what they were in the first place?

“W-well, you’re going to test prep to turn those results around, aren’t you? If you take the easy way out, I’m worried you’ll go to some off-brand school and get mixed up with a weird friend circle that’ll mess you up. If you think people like me and Sasachi are gonna be around you forever, you’re wrong.”

“Huh? Mess me up how? I’m not into drugs, or partying or whatever.”

“Not that. I think you wouldn’t be able to keep up with campus life, so you’d stay at home all day playing online games. And I don’t think you’d have anyone checking up on you, either.”

“What kinda person is the ‘me’ you’re picturing, anyway?”

“You know, the kind of guy with cold eyes fixed upon the world, bearing all this darkness, turning away from how brightly his talented brother is shining...”

“I *swear* I’ll get into a better university than you! I just decided! It’s *done*, okay?!”

She resisted the urge to say, “I dare you to try.” Normally she’d say it, but now she saw signs that Yoshiya, despite taking his sweet time to rev up the engine, was finally about to get serious. If she bad-mouthed him right now, it really *would* be raining on his parade.

“Well, good luck. I’m gonna do my best, too, so you’re gonna have trouble catching up to me.”

“You watch me! I’m gonna double my score again at the next English test! Try not to cry when I do!”

“Oh, you’ll get a perfect score? Wow. If you actually do that, okay, I’ll admit defeat.”

It was a bit clumsy, but Kaori and Yoshiya were now back to their normal mode of conversation as they went through the station turnstile.

As they did, Chiho was sending out a text to a certain number. The person she had in mind might be at work right now, so she wanted to ask if she was free first.

“Hello? Chiho? What’s up?”

Fortunately, the response came as a voice call.

“Sorry to text you out of nowhere, Rika. Do you think you could meet up with me in a bit? I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Something? Something serious?”

Rika Suzuki sensed something ominous over the phone, perhaps. Chiho could hear the sounds of her preparing to leave in the background.

“No... Sorry. It’s not anything that happened. And it kinda-sorta has to do with Ente Isla, but not directly.”

“Oh?”

“Rika,” Chiho said, in a voice that she later realized sounded almost tearful. “I have no idea what kind of attitude I should take toward college.”



“Aaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...”

After receiving the whole story, Rika’s expression was totally inscrutable—equal measures of understanding, confusion, and sympathy. In front of her was Chiho, looking at her hands with the bow leaned against the restaurant wall. Even with her face turned downward, she could make out the sigh escaping from her friend’s lips.

“That sounds really tough, Chiho.”

This silence couldn’t go on forever, so Rika felt obliged to speak. It was her way of buying time while she organized her thoughts.

“But... Well, in terms of people facing exam difficulties, *your* situation has to rank in the top five or so.”

“It’s not number one?”

“Well, you yourself aren’t in mortal danger, at least. It’s a big world out there. And it’s kind of a miracle, still, that anyone can get whatever education they want to here in Japan, if they try.”

“But...”

“I get it. I really do. Your friend Rika hears you loud and clear. You’re definitely the only teenager who has to worry about monsters appearing in Tokyo or evil angels from another dimension coming around or whatever. You’re definitely number one within Japan, at least.”

“I just... I’m not sure what I should be living for any longer.”

“Your situation’s so...real. I dunno where to begin.”

College talk seemed like a heavy load for Rika to bear, given that she had opted against college and moved far away from home to work assorted part-time jobs. But as she heard Chiho out, she realized that even counting everything in Japan, the world, and Ente Isla, she was the only person who

could really understand the root of Chiho's concerns. It was the same as when Rika got depressed after Ashiya grew cold on her. Only someone from Earth who loved that gang of aliens who now felt totally at home in Japan could appreciate this.

"Well, as you know, I'm just cruising along with no college and no full-time gig so I'm not one to talk, but... I think Maki mentioned it to me once, but you're set on going to *some* kind of college, right?"

"Yes. I mean, I've had the vague concept in my mind for a while, but..."

She explained to Rika how she came to work at the McRonald by Hatagaya Station.

"I kind of wanted to get an English degree at the time. Like, whether I'm in Japan or elsewhere, if I knew English, I figured that'd make life a lot more fun. Then right after that..."

"...You found out your coworker at Maggie's was a Devil King. Or I guess Emi and Maou are both aliens, really. Not just from another country, but another planet."

Rika knew in advance that the conversation would probably get pretty absurd, so they decided to visit Gyo-Gyo-En, their usual choice in conveyor-belt sushi joints, for this chat. They had installed a somewhat fancy coffee machine as of late, so on the table were two lattes and a couple of cake slices—a poor match for a place that smelled of sushi rice and had pop songs arranged for traditional Japanese instruments playing from the speaker.

"Well, why don't you try gunning for some kinda prestigious college? Like, figure out what your best subjects are, and stuff. Maki probably said something like that, right?"

Indeed, Maki Shimizu—a college student who worked with Rika—once advised Chiho that if she felt lost, to simply try for the best university she thought she had a chance at. Chiho understood the logic of that well enough, but right now, she couldn't see how doing that would connect with the vague hopes for the future she had in mind. It prevented her from finding that first spark, and now she was just running in place.

“First Maou and now you, huh?”

“Huh?”

“No, um... Look, the only things in this booth are you, me, this sushi, and this coffee, and we’re two Earthlings who know a secret nobody else does in the entire world. Why don’t we honestly try to analyze this?”

Rika shot an eye toward the sushi belt, mostly picked over and empty after the lunch rush.

“I’m guessing that you’re looking for some kind of guide, or spark, or procedure I can lay out for you, telling you to do this and this and this when you find yourself in trouble.”

“That...might be true, yes.”

Looking back, Chiho had only started thinking about this because of Kaori talking about her list of candidate colleges.

“When you were still new on the job, you saw Maou helping customers in English and you thought, yeah, that’d be kinda nice, right? And you’re from different backgrounds, but you’re both doing the same thing—like, analyzing your current situation and figuring out what you want to do, and what you *can* do. With the lizard, if push comes to shove with him, you’re gonna have to leave it to the muscle in the group. If Maou and Emi can’t handle him, I think Ms. Ohguro and the landlord and Emi’s mom can figure something out. And as for everything else—let’s just throw common sense out the window and list up everything you want to do right now, okay?”

“...Okay.”

Chiho didn’t seem to know what this was getting at. So Rika threw a fastball of emotion at her.

“So the first thing... In the future, do you want to marry Maou?”

“Eh!!!!!! Marry?!?!?!?”

Chiho tried to play it off at first, but the effect was immediate. She was arched backward like a boxer who’d just taken an uppercut. When she got back down, her face was as red as a piece of *katsuo*, or *maguro*, or maybe even *ikura*.

“.....If.....I could.....”

The voice was as quiet as a mosquito, but Rika was eminently satisfied with it.

“Good, good. So think about what you need to achieve that. Maou has all the documentation to be a Japanese citizen, right? So there wouldn’t be any legal issues. If you were trying to marry Maou, what do you think you would be missing?”

Chiho tried her best to calm her rising pulse and heavy breathing. She imagined life with her beloved—like a young girl’s passing fantasy just before falling asleep—and, fighting back the shame that threatened to throw her to the ground, she spoke.

“...A long enough...lifetime. Demons live for so long...”

She couldn’t do anything about *that*, could she? Rika stopped for a moment, filling Chiho with discouragement, but then she smiled again.

“All right. The same deal as Emi’s parents. I see. Yeah, your bodies are different, after all. So your life expectancies are too far apart. What else?”

“Uh...uhmm...the power to fight?”

“Fighting power. You mean like using swords and casting spells and stuff?”

“Y-yes... That, and the Ente Islan language.”

“Oh, sure, Ente Islan. And of course, it’s not like there’s an ‘Earthian’ language, so I’m sure they’ve got lots of them over there, too. Anything else?”

“Uhhh...”

“Is that it?”

“Um, probably?”

Interacting with the living example of Laila and Nord, and seeing the Ente Islan lifestyle for herself during the zirga, made it clear to Chiho which chasms between her and Maou were unfillable. Problems that couldn’t be dealt with in Japan. But—looking at the pen and paper she had taken out at some point—Rika spoke up.

“Uh-uh. There’s more.”

“Huh?”

“Because those are all just aspects of Ente Isla that you’re considering.”

Rika showed Chiho her notes.

“The life expectancy thing is because you’re human and Maou’s a demon, right? You don’t need fighting force like that unless you get into trouble over there. Strong or not, you’ve already been slayin’ demons left and right.”

“Um, that, *yeah*, uh...”

“And can’t you use some of that voodoo magic to deal with the language barrier for now? Like, maybe that magic power won’t be available after this fight is over, but Suzuno and Emerald and Emi can speak Japanese, so even if magic gets shut off or whatever, it can’t be a big problem. So, yeah, I don’t see any need to worry too much about those things.”

“But...”

“And Maou’s gonna accept your manager’s offer, isn’t he? Assuming he’s alive three years from now.”

“...Huh?”

“He said as much back at White Day, remember? Right now he has to go back to Devil King mode for a bit, but in three years, he’d like to help with the manager’s restaurant or company or whatever. So if you want to be with Maou forever while he works in Japan, I think that narrows down what you need to do in Japan to achieve that by a whole lot. Like my grandfather told me, marriage is like the world’s smallest mutual-aid contract.”

Chiho took a few moments to figure out what this meant. Rika, realizing this, paused a second or two before continuing.

“One of you isn’t leaning on the other one. You want to be a source of strength to Maou, and Maou, you know, he has to make an effort and give up a few things if he’s marrying you. As far as I can tell, you two have a pretty good thing going, so I don’t think you need to worry much about that, but you can’t go on like how it is now forever. If you keep thinking about how to adjust yourself for Maou’s sake, you’ll wind up spoiling him all the time. That’s not

love; it's codependence. There's a lot that Maou's gonna have to do for you, too, Chiho."

"That, that, that, um, it, it's not a, a 'pretty good thing'..."

"It's not like Maou has a ton of girls in his life anyway. If it doesn't work out with you, it's not gonna work out with anyone for a while, I don't think."

"There—there are a *lot* of women around Maou."

"Oh? Really? Sorry if this sounds creepy, but even if Maou has any interest in human women in the *first* place, I don't see any possible competitor to you out there besides maybe Suzuno."

"Huh? That, she's, ummm, I don't think so, no...but..."

Normally Chiho would have interpreted this as Rika picking on her. But Rika was serious.

"I mean, for example, Emi? Realistically speaking, no way."

"What?!"

This shocked Chiho. It honestly surprised her how much it did.

"What, am I wrong? I mean, some people say a lot of good relationships start from less than nothing, but I think Stockholm syndrome would work only so much with those two. It's a miracle they're acting like friends right now, even. I can't see much more than that happening."

"Ahh...ahh...you don't think?"

"And along those lines, Emeralda would never happen, either. She's the type to hold a grudge even more than Emi. She sees a real stark difference between politely forgiving someone, and doing so on a personal level. And I'm supposing that nobody else at Maggie's knows about Maou's other life, so there's no need to really count them. And that just leaves you and Suzuno."

"I-if you put it that way, then I suppose, but..."

"Suzuno's a real strong woman. She's his neighbor, they have kind of the same routine, she's *super* caring for people, she doesn't have a personal vendetta against Maou, she's got experience living in modern society, and she's

a total domestic goddess, isn't she?"

"Y-yeah, that's true..."

Chiho had never pictured the Church cleric as a full-fledged member of society before. But in terms of women she had directly marked out as "rivals for Maou" in her life, Suzuno really was the only one. They didn't exactly meet under the rosiest of circumstances. Even Chiho's habit of bringing food to Devil's Castle got its start out of a sense of competition against Suzuno. It wasn't *that* long ago, but somehow she had forgotten about it. Her falling into jealousy (and, subsequently, self-loathing) over Maou and Emi getting closer was still fresh in her mind, but it wasn't at all arrogant or self-serving to say that she never considered them a serious couple.

Only with Suzuno did she ever think, *I don't want her to take Maou*. It was what drove her to admit her feelings to the man. There was no doubting that.

"Nnnnnnnnnnnngggghhhhhh!"

She buried her face in her hands, shaking her head as she put it against the table. It made Rika chuckle.

"I'm guessing you just remembered something that makes you want to die? You're so cute, Chiho."

No, Suzuno wanted to do things with Maou, but entirely of the master-and-servant type. Chiho knew it wasn't about being a couple. She and Suzuno were good friends now, so wouldn't it be extremely rude to consider her a rival in love at this point?

"Besides, Suzuno herself doesn't think badly of Maou, does she?"

But Rika, who had a knack for seeming to read Chiho's mind, was now throwing that mind into overdrive. Come to think of it, when they were all talking about what to do for Valentine's Day, Kaori's suggestion to give chocolate to Maou did seem to oddly unnerve Suzuno. Was it...*that* sort of thing...?

"N-no! But then I'd have to start thinking about Suzuno's feelings, and it's not nice to imagine this and that about other people, and besides, I've got my hands full dealing with myself, um... I mean, I'm not going on about whether I

can marry or not, but... Huh? What am I... Um, what were we talking about?!"

It was trivially easy to see how flustered Chiho was. Rika poured out some more tea and offered a cup to calm her down.

"All right, chill out. If you get *too* flustered, it's gonna start getting fun for me."

"I—I *am* calm— *Ahh!*"

Chiho, clearly not calm, wound up burning her tongue on the fresh tea.

"Ha-ha-ha... But anyway, marriage isn't like a finish line or anything. There's a huge amount of other things that start after that, and there's no such thing as a couple that has it all worked out the moment they walk down the aisle. There are problems that take years, even decades, to float to the surface. When they do, couples have to work together to solve them, right?"

Rika was sounding like she herself was married now, but Chiho couldn't help noticing something sad in her eyes.

"...Rika?"

"Lemme just say, that's not about Ashiya."

Realizing Chiho had noticed it, Rika went one step ahead and gave her an affected smile.

"It kind of connects to why I'm here bumming around in Tokyo when my family's from Kobe, but it's a real boring story, so I'll save it for later."

"Okay..."

The firm conclusiveness to Rika's voice prevented Chiho from pursuing the topic further.

"But regardless, I think these are the two things you need to look into in order to take the next step as a teenage girl, Chiho. That way..."

Rika jotted down a few things on her piece of paper—things that neither Emi nor Suzuno, Kaori, nor even Chiho's own parents could've given her if she'd turned to them for help.

"...I think you'll start seeing the guideposts for the next step to take."

Half an hour later, Rika was sitting by herself at the Gyo-Gyo-En table. Chiho was gone, attending to her McDonald shift. She tried to cover the whole tab in exchange for Rika's help, but Rika refused to give her the check, noting that she owed her a favor and Chiho shouldn't try covering so much for people older than her anyway.

She glanced at her phone. A text was waiting. Unlocking it, she found a picture of a young woman in a brand-new school uniform, accompanied by the line "Yaaaay I'm a high school student now!!!"

"Oh, man, *that* brings me back. She must've gotten them to buy a new outfit."

Rika let out a small smile. The uniform was for her old school; she had worn one of them herself.

This text was sent by one Rina Suzuki, Rika's younger sister by six years, and before too long, she'd be starting her first year of high school.

Another text came along.

"I'm not gonna go to college, so if you don't come back home before I graduate, I'm gonna take over the company instead of you!!!!"

Rika received this "warning" from her sister every time she came home for the holidays. It was something she just sort of smiled and laughed off.

"July, huh...? And yeah... Given my age, I better do what needs to be done pretty soon. I definitely can't act all high and mighty around Chiho, no..."

Pretending she didn't read that, Rika stuffed the phone into her bag and rang the bell on the table to settle the tab.



"Hello there!"

"Oh, hey, Chi."

Maou was the first face Chiho saw when she emerged from the staff room. It made her voice tense up a little, despite herself, although she was sure it didn't show up on her face. Her talk with Rika had been stimulating, to say the least, but she was no longer wallowing in shame.

"Hey, Chi, come here a sec."

“What’s up?”

Chiho meekly approached the beckoning Maou, who seemed to hesitate a bit before speaking.

“She’s upstairs right now.”

“...!”

There was no need to ask who. The moment had finally come.

“What was she like?” Chiho asked, voice hushed.

“I can’t really tell yet. She’s definitely different from Ms. Kisaki, though.”

Chiho would learn what Maou meant ten minutes later.

Kisaki’s familiar voice rang out on their headsets. “Marko, I’m going downstairs. Can you go up for me again?”

Then came the voice of a wholly unfamiliar woman. “Thank you very much.”

Maou followed the order and climbed the stairs to the café space. Replacing him was Kisaki in business attire and a woman Chiho hadn’t seen before. Double-checking that no customers were coming, Chiho walked up to them.

“Hello! My name’s Chiho Sasaki!”

Kisaki looked behind her for a second, but still kept her back to her subordinate.

“It’s good to meet you, Sasaki.”

The woman coming down behind Kisaki wasn’t much taller than Chiho and was a slip of a woman to boot; her most noticeable characteristic was the fact that she had glasses on her face.

“My name is Kotomi Iwaki, and I’ll be the new store manager.”

For Chiho, who was expecting a new MgRonald manager to be an epoch-making event, it was a major letdown.

Until now, the word *manager* had brought up nobody besides Kisaki in Chiho’s mind. Working under her at the Hatagaya Station MgRonald, she had gained all kinds of hard-to-earn *experience*, as the word gets used in standard

help-wanted ads. And now, with April marking the new fiscal year, that manager was leaving. Chiho was picturing something resembling a graduation or diploma ceremony for some reason.

“Starting today, Ms. Iwaki and I will be working on handing the torch over to her. By the end of the first week of April, I’ll be out of this location.”

The truth from Kisaki’s lips couldn’t have been given more casually. *That’s it?* Chiho almost said, barely keeping the question in. It just seemed way too informal.

“What’s up, Chi?” Akiko Ohki stealthily asked once she began work. “You look like you’re not all the here today.”

“Oh, no, I’m fine...”

Chiho shook her head. Her completely still hands were indicating otherwise, so she quickly got back to disinfecting the stack of trays in front of her.

“...Okay, maybe I’m not.”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t imagine Ms. Kisaki leaving would feel so casual. Not to sound mean, but it’s disappointing.”

Akiko immediately knew what Chiho was talking about. “Yeah. I haven’t experienced this a lot of times, either, but this isn’t school, you know...”

It was an accurate reaction to what bothered Chiho.

“It’s not like school?”

“No. I mean, it’s not like there was some special ceremony when we got hired, was there? It’s the same thing. When you’re grown up, things only really change with the new year, or like during accounting periods or whatever. The year’s all divided up, and it cycles through year after year, so it’s not like things completely change every few years the way it does for students.”

“It’s not...?”

“Of course, once you’re grown up, you *do* start to have these.”

“These?”

Chiho looked up to find Akiko holding an imaginary wineglass.

“Oh, that’s no fair! Are you guys having going-away parties with no minors allowed?”

The crew at the Hatagaya McRonald got along remarkably well, so Chiho knew that some of them held gatherings at bars and such on irregular occasions. She was too young to join those, though, and nobody on staff was irresponsible enough to try dragging her in. That was what she assumed Akiko’s gesture meant, but instead Akiko sadly shook her head.

“I suggested we hold one, but she said no. Just, like, ‘I appreciate the thought’ and all that. You know, people like you who’re young, or people who work nights, might not be able to join in if the timing doesn’t work out. That wouldn’t be fair, so she said she’ll just give everybody on staff a few personal words instead. That’s so like her, isn’t it?”

Kisaki’s thoroughness gave Chiho goose bumps—but she still couldn’t shake off the loneliness. That was her “ceremony,” then? When it was Chiho’s turn, what should she talk about? Because Kisaki had a lot to do with one of the two things Rika suggested she “check on” just a half hour or so ago. Was it something Chiho could really bring up at the last moment she could talk with her?

“So, yeah, if we wanna take the Kisaki approach, then I guess we have to look to the future instead of dwelling on the past. Along those lines, what we *should* be holding is a welcome party for Ms. Iwaki.”

“Ohh, that makes sense.” Chiho considered that reasonable enough.

“So what do you think of the new manager, Chi?”

“I don’t think much of anything yet. All I’ve done so far is say hi to her.”

Kisaki and Iwaki had been holed up in the rear office for a while now, no doubt working out handoff-related things. Maou had called her “definitely different” from Kisaki, and Chiho had to agree with that at first blush, but she wouldn’t know the gritty details until they started working together.

“Um...maybe it’s rude to describe a grown woman this way, but I thought she was kind of cute.”

“I can get that. It’s like you wanna give her a big bear hug. Totally different impression from Ms. Kisasi.”

Her body type basically mirrored Chiho’s, which made her a measure smaller than the rest of the Hatagaya Station crew. Placed next to the heavyset Kawata, they’d almost look like father and daughter.

“Thing is, I know nothing about her personality yet. If she’s not good with drinking and stuff, it’d just be rude to her, y’know?”

“Oh, not everybody’s into that? Because I always had the impression that grown-ups looked forward to hanging out at bars on Friday nights after work.”

This was a bit surprising to Chiho. She always looked forward to the raucous dinners they had at Maou’s place, although they had begun to taper off in recent days. She was too young to know how a drinking party really worked, but she got along well with the adults in her life, so she assumed that dinner parties and drinking parties were pretty similar. But Akiko, older than Chiho and a veteran of at least a few events she wanted to run screaming from, gave her an exaggerated nod in reply.

“Well, if you’re not into that scene, you’re *really* not into it. I mean, even me—unless I know the people involved pretty well, I’m never really *that* enthused about it. I can’t really hold my liquor anyway. If I had to guess, I’d say about half of drinking-age people don’t really like the whole scene.”

“Huhh?!”

Chiho wanted to believe this was nonsense, but Akiko was deadly serious.

“I mean, there are different types of drinking parties. If it’s with people I like, then I’m all for them, but it’s not like I have free money for it all the time. And if there’s somebody I don’t get along with, or it’s held someplace where I don’t like the food, or I can expect my boss or manager to lecture me the whole time I’m there... You know, there can be a lot of question marks. And that’s just for me as a college student, so it’s probably even *more* true once you graduate. You still hear a lot about people who can’t drink being forced into getting loaded at parties like that, because they can’t say no to their bosses or whatever.”

“Oh... But you’re not supposed to force people into doing that these days,

right? I remember hearing about ‘alcohol harassment’ on the news and stuff...”

The drinking-age coworkers around Chiho gave this a small chuckle.

“Oh, well,” laughed Akiko, “people are changing with the times. That sort of thing doesn’t happen nearly as much as it used to. Still—it’s not like I’m some expert at the age of twenty, but sometimes I wonder where all the grown-ups I looked up to as a kid went off to. If you think everyone’s all mature, like Ms. Kisaki and Mr. Sarue, then that’ll bite back at you later. Many adults are immature under the surface, and it comes out in drinking parties.”

“You’d count Mr. Sarue as ‘mature’?” Chiho replied curtly.

The question didn’t change Akiko’s expression. “Maybe not at first,” she said, “but now, definitely. When I talk to Kana about work and stuff, sometimes it’s like we’re talking about a whole different person.”

Kanako Furuya, shift manager at the Sentucky Fried Chicken across the street from this MgRonald, was now apparently friends enough with Akiko that they were having regular chats like this. Maybe, being of the same age and working in similar environments, they both had their own takes on this question.

As Chiho pondered this, Akiko looked around her a moment before lowering her voice. “So,” she said, sounding a little annoyed, “like, I really wanna start working with Ms. Iwaki and, you know, figure her out as a person. Like, whether we can get along or not, kind of thing. I’m gonna be staying on here for a while still, so it’s better if we’re all friendly, y’know?”

“Yeah... True. But we’re gonna start to get busy pretty soon, so I’m sure she’ll be coming out.” Akiko checked the clock. “Oops. We talked too much. I need to check on the drink and sauce dispensers.”

The first wave of the dinner rush would be coming soon, and Akiko jogged over to the drink machine to check the syrup levels and clean everything up.

As Chiho put away the trays she’d wiped off while talking to Akiko, she looked over the dining space on the other side of the counter from her. It would be almost a year since she began standing behind this counter, and she had seen lots of new things—new *worlds*—she couldn’t have even imagined if she were still sitting at one of those tables. She felt like she could almost see herself at a

table right now, back last April, agonizing over what to write on her college guidance worksheet.

But time was passing fast. And whether she was confident that she had accumulated enough experience or not, Chiho found herself at the edge of a stairway she'd need to step up and climb if she wanted to take responsibility for her life.

Between the full crew headcount and the presence of both Kisaki and Iwaki as managers, the dinner rush passed without incident.

On the floor, Iwaki exhibited a completely different sort of presence from Kisaki. Her style, Chiho thought, leaned closer to Maou's. She wasn't a pillar of composed stability like Kisaki or Kawata; rather, like Maou or Akiko, the way she used speed and precision to keep things running smoothly left an impression. It was at least fair to say that working with her wouldn't be stressful. Iwaki was no doubt trying to make the transition go well, but based on Maou's and Akiko's reactions, Chiho didn't think her impression was mistaken. What the customers would think of her was another question, but Chiho was hearing that while some of the regulars said they would miss Kisaki, they were still paying their normal visits.

Based on what Chiho saw during her shift, it seemed fair to say that this new manager could keep things fun at the workplace. That's why what she ended up saying to Kisaki and Iwaki in the staff room after she clocked out took a lot of bravery on her part:

"Ms. Kisaki, I wanted to talk to you about something."

"...What's that?"

The two managers seemed like they were almost expecting Chiho to speak up. She and Iwaki had met for the first time today; bringing up a topic like this was bound to leave a terrible impression, Chiho decided. But she had to say it, and she had to say it today.

"First, I'm sorry if this is a super-personal request of mine, but if we had a chance to talk outside the workplace maybe... And second...I needed to tell you, too, Ms. Iwaki."

For the sake of her future, her life, and her loved ones, she had to say it.

“I’m thinking about leaving my job at the end of this month.”

Kisaki and Iwaki took the news silently.



“So it finally happened, huh?”

It was during closing that night when Maou was called by Kisaki and Iwaki to join them in the back office, only to be told that Chiho would quit at the end of April. His reaction was typically calm—looking at the calendar, it was a pretty obvious decision for a girl preparing for college exams—but Kisaki wasn’t done there.

“Did you hear anything about this?”

“Me?”

Maou was confused at the slightly accusatory tone of Kisaki’s voice.

“I doubt she would have told anyone else,” she went on.

“Huh?”

“...Oh, so it is.” Iwaki, picking up on what Kisaki was implying to the incredulous man, brought a pair of fingertips to her mouth in surprise. “So you’re not related, then? That’s no good, but it is what it is, I guess...”

“Um, what’s this about, Ms. Kisaki?” Maou stuttered.

“You should ask yourself that question. But anyway, I was just talking to Ms. Iwaki here for a moment.”

“Uh-huh...?”

Maou was now firmly lost, but at Kisaki’s nod, Iwaki handed him a piece of paper. He looked at it—then immediately realized what the topic was.

“This isn’t...bad, is it?”

“It’s bad.” Iwaki nodded, not a single note of joy in the eyes behind her glasses. “We actually anticipated that Ms. Sasaki might be leaving soon. It’s her last year of high school and I heard she’s a very diligent young woman, so if she was getting serious about exams, we expected May at the latest...but not even

Ms. Kisaki was expecting this.”

She had handed Maou a copy of the rough shift schedules for May, June, and July. It being the first week of April, they were mostly empty except for the names of crewmembers expected to work that month. But those names were the problem.

“Counting Chi, five people... Wait, Mae, too? Mae’s quitting?!”

“Frankly, it’s an emergency.”

Kisaki wasn’t mincing words, and Maou couldn’t refute her. Five different people had announced plans to leave MgRonald in the space of these three months.

Chiho’s going away was difficult enough for Maou to deal with, of course, but in terms of the kitchen, the April departure of “Mae”—Kazuko Maeyama, the other shift manager at this location—was an even bigger blow. Now sixty-one, she had been working at the Hatagaya Station location for ten years; Kisaki was the third manager she’d served under, and during the afternoon and non-weekday shifts, she was the face of the franchise. Maou had worked with her countless times on Saturdays and Sundays; it was Maeyama who had served as his first trainer, way back when.

She was well built for her age, got along with the rest of the crew, never whined, and was treated like a kind of mascot for the younger staffers. When it came to work, however, she was a veteran through and through, bringing a dignified presence to the floor with her actions. The managers were all polite to her, and although being a married woman meant she wasn’t too flexible with her shifts, losing Maeyama meant losing one of the mainstays of the weekends at Hatagaya. It was devastating.

“I told Ms. Iwaki that, counting Chi, we could expect three people to quit this spring. That was too optimistic of me, and that’s my mistake. Right at the very end, I screwed up really bad.”

“Well,” Iwaki replied, “you couldn’t help it. Even the regional manager didn’t expect Ms. Maeyama to quit. That isn’t your fault.”

It did little to brighten Kisaki’s expression.

“But what happened to Mae?” Maou wondered. “Because there was no indication whatsoever that she was gonna leave...”

“She needs to take care of an elderly family member. We’re not really in a position to convince her to stay on.”

“Oh...”

No, it wasn’t something non-family members could butt into. Maou understood that well enough.

“She was kind enough to say,” Kisasi stated, “that she wants to return once things settle down a little, but nobody knows when that’ll be.”

“Yes, and the regional rep said that we’d gladly take her back when she’s able...but until she can, we’ll just have to deal with it.”

“So on top of all that, Chi gave us her notice today. And as I’m sure you can guess, the other three are also core performers leaving for reasons we can’t do anything about. And no matter how it shakes out, things are gonna hit rock bottom...”

“...In July, huh?” Maou asked, deflating.

“Yes.” Iwaki nodded. “Even if we hurriedly cobbled together five new people within the month of April, I doubt we could fill up the hole left by Maeyama and Sasaki starting in May. And we’ll be losing more veterans every month after that, all of whom we’ll have to replace with new people.”

Maou mentally ran down the remaining staff available for shift work. It made him wince. “It’s gonna be cutting it pretty close with training, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. And right in the midst of all that instability, we’ll be going into July without you and Emi-yu.”

July—the deadline for Maou’s battle against heaven. These were tentative plans, of course; depending on how things went, the final battle could take place before then, although Maou doubted it for now. What happened deep underground in the demon realms made all of them more careful—or hesitant, to be more precise. Maou and his friends all agreed it’d be much better to prepare as much as possible for a final resolution in July. What’s more, due to

the circumstances surrounding Devil's Castle in Ente Isla, there was a chance that if they *didn't* do it by July Japan time, they'd lose their chance to strike the first blow against heaven.

Along those lines, Maou and Emi had both declared themselves away for the entire month of July—but now, the shifts for July at the Hatagaya Station McDonald were looking utterly barren of staff. Maou and Emi were, of course, just hourly employees. It was the manager's job to oversee and arrange shift schedules. If they wanted to, they could turn away and claim there was no need to put in work beyond what they were paid for—and common sense would be on their side. But Maou would never do that, and he sincerely doubted Emi would, either. If Amane Ohguro was around, she'd almost certainly be griping at them about whether fast-food work shifts were more important than the fate of entire worlds, but that wasn't the issue here. It was a matter of personal pride on both of their parts.

"I really don't like to do this, but I'm going to relent a little this time. If—*if* — it's possible, do you have any friends or acquaintances you think would be interested?"

It was extremely unusual, really unheard of, for Kiseki to ask her crew directly for referrals like this. Even if someone suddenly had to take off due to illness, she never asked them to find a replacement for their shift. But now things were urgent enough that Kiseki was asking Maou himself, just as he was about to leave for the day.

Maou's eyes darted between the old and the new managers.

"....."

Something flashed across his mind for a moment, but it wasn't the right time for that yet. He immediately banished it.

"...I'll see what I can do."

That was all he could really say, even as he felt like Iwaki's eyes were starting to anxiously water up.



On the way home, pedaling his bicycle, Maou started talking to himself.

“Five people...”

Multiple crewmembers, all leaving suddenly at roughly the same time. It was staggering news, but moping over it wouldn't change reality.

“And Kisasi's gonna be transferred soon...”

There were still many question marks surrounding the new manager, Iwaki, and how she'd fit in with the crew.

“And now Chi's quitting...”

Stopped at a red light, Maou looked back the way he'd come. It seemed like the street itself was shifting, twisting itself in odd directions.

“Something about losing people you know well... It really hits you hard.”



On that day—the day he faced battle in a demon-realm cave, only to be defeated without making a single contribution—Maou woke up to hazily discover that he was in the familiar confines of Room 201 of Villa Rosa Sasazuka. Fending off a headache as he rose, he realized there was a crowd next to him—Laila, Amane, Acieth, and Chiho.

“I couldn't do anything by myself, so I asked Amane for help.”

“Yeah, I heard you got your latent force ripped away from ya. Kamazuki is watching over Yusa and Alas Ramus next door. Urushihara's with the chicken and the lizard.”

“Oh... Ow.”

Even in his current dim state, Maou could see that Laila deserved no criticism. Having to trundle a chicken, a lizard, Maou, Emi, and the unfused Acieth and Alas Ramus through a Gate was asking a lot at once.

“Do I have a scab here? Oooh... You okay, Acieth?”

He searched his scrambled memory. Then he felt something strong against his chest. It stopped him from speaking.

“Ch... Chi?”

“.....”

Chiho had her arms around him, face buried in his chest.

“Chi?! Wh-why are you...?”

“...!!”

She silently shook her head, as Laila and Amane shrugged at each other.

“You have no idea why she might be here?”

“Oh, Mom, do not bother to do the asking. Maou, sometimes I wonder if he is paying full attention.”

“Huhh?!”

That was mean of them, but as he felt Chiho’s body tremble on top of him, Maou finally picked up on where he was.

“.....”

Seeing the whorl of hair on the top of Chiho’s head, he eased up the tension on his body. Laila and Amane gave each other a look and left the room. Acieth, meanwhile, stretched out her legs, looking a little bored.

“...Sorry I made you worry,” he said, running a hand through her hair.

“...!”

Chiho looked up and gave him a great big nod.



That hit home more than any painful blow.

He had made Chiho worry about him many times before, but he’d never felt this guilty about it before.

That was because at that moment, for the first time in his life, Maou noticed an emotion he hadn’t stirred in anyone before.

A gentle, but intense feeling—with pangs of fear mixed in. Being Maou, or rather, being a demon, he could taste that fear instinctively.

The King of All Demons, survivor of countless battles and tragedies, felt *terror* for the first time in a long while.

The terror of his life coming to a close. The terror of experiencing pain. The

terror of losing something you love; the terror of the unknown. Whether demon or human, he had witnessed that terror so much, it bored him by now—but what he picked up from Chiho then was the terror of not knowing what to do if Maou went away.

This was a little different from the fear of losing a loved one to death, something Maou had encountered before, because this “someone you loved” had always been some unknown person to him. It differed at the root from the “concern” shown by Camio or Adramelech or Ashiya during their Devil King’s Army days, too. With them, they might have wailed and felt remorse if they’d lost Maou, but the possibility of that loss was always somewhere in their minds, along with their future hopes afterward. The fear of loss didn’t rule over their minds; it was a given part of war.

But Chiho had no idea what she would do if she lost Maou. She couldn’t face up to that fear. It made her cry, and the fact that someone could’ve been so badly shaken out of worry over his life made Maou, or rather Satan, feel truly shocked. If, for example, Maou had some unforeseen accident that cost him his life, lots of people would cry for him. He was popular enough to merit that, and there was nothing suspicious about it. But as a being who could turn people’s emotions into demonic force, he had just tapped into something deeper—the roots of a girl who had declared her love for him, even after he’d fully revealed himself.

The first time he saw that heart, that face, was something he was sure he’d never forget. It would remain clearer in his mind than even when Laila had saved his life as a child.

“Chi...”

Maou whispered the name of the human girl...

“What? Being the sentimental?”

...and then the existence sharing a body with Maou griped at him. He could easily imagine the grin on her face. He stuck out his chin and winced.

Looking up, the stoplight ahead was about to turn red. His bike screeched to a halt.

"If you wanna play the fool all day, just do it. You are the tiring out of me."

Unlike Maou and Emi, who had paid a clear physical price, Acieth back in Japan was the same gluttonous Acieth as she always was. When he'd asked about her beating the crap out of that space suit, she'd remembered it perfectly—but when he had asked how her bare-handed kung fu had succeeded where Emi and her sword had so utterly failed, she had simply replied, "Umm, I dunno," with a smile that made you want to shake her.

Maou himself was unconscious for the duration of the ordeal, but the way Laila had described it to him, Acieth hadn't been herself then. But Maou did recall something: There had been several times before when Acieth had undergone a sudden personality shift when faced with a powerful foe, her strength proving to overwhelm that foe. It had happened when Camael and the Malebranche had attacked Chiho's school. It had happened with the battle against the angels on the Eastern Island. She hadn't separated from Maou and gone berserk like this time, but even on those occasions, Acieth had crossed some kind of cosmic line.

"You know, this not the first time, but Maou, you are the very hypersensitive, no?"

"Huh?"

"It is just the part-time job, no? Chiho, she is not moving the very long distance away or anything. Why do the sighing so much?"

"When you call it *just* a part-time job, it pisses me off more than when Urushihara calls it that."

"What do you mean?"

"With all the crap I have to deal with, if work is giving me a bunch of trouble, too, even the Devil King's gonna complain about how it's a pain in the ass. The least you could do is start remembering what happened and how your power works. It'd make things a *little* easier, at least."

"Yeah, but if I not remember, I not remember—"

"If you remember it, I'll buy you as much fried chicken at the convenience store as you want."

“Really?!”

The internal shouting in his mind almost made Maou lose his balance on the bicycle. Of course, this was Acieth being Acieth; not even Maou thought this would lead to some breakthrough for dealing with Ignora. Acieth was toying with him, and he gave her a mental rap on the rear end in response.

“Please wait, okay? I will do the remembering very hard! Nnnnnnngh...!!”

Despite her flippant tone, she seemed to be seriously giving it a try. If this somehow resulted in a plan for winning their battle...

“Funny to think convenience store food is what it takes to save a planet.”

Maou smiled at the thought as he pedaled past the last convenience store along his route back home.

“AaaaaAAAHHH! Time out, time out! You are passing the storrrre!!”

“Sorry. Time’s up. Better luck next time.”

“Noooooooooooooooooo!!”

If Maou had manifested Acieth right now, he could imagine her rolling around the street in agony. It made him smile again.

“I don’t want a repeat of what happened before, so...”

The loss of his demonic force in the cave. The “sharpening” of that demon sword knocking him unconscious. He’d seen neither of those things coming; they were unavoidable calamities.

“This time, I was just lucky.”

Whether unavoidable or not, if he had run into those things during battle, he would have died. And this was no longer just about a demon realm where you risked your life every day. He was trusted, relied upon. He had health and stability, some amount of money, and most of all, close companions. Unavoidable or not, in *this* world, if he lost those, they’d never come back.

“Chi sure is watching out for me, isn’t she?”

“Maou?! Do not change terms! Chi’s fried chicken, it is not counting for this! You must spend the money of you and buy the FrenChik from FriendMart for

me!!”

“You’re seriously... Ah, whatever,” lamented Maou as he dragged himself out of his morass of sentimentality.

They were now close to his apartment. Suzuno wasn’t back from Ente Isla so Room 202 was dark, but the fluorescent light over the kitchen sink in Room 101 was on. Bringing Dullahan II to a stop, he knocked on the Room 101 door instead of climbing the stairs.

“Hello,” came Nord Justina’s gentle voice as he opened the door. “Late shift, huh? And today was your new manager’s first day, wasn’t it? I thought you’d be later.”

“How do you know that?”

“Chiho sent me a text,” Emi called from within the apartment.

“Chi did...? Oh. Did she tell you anything else?”

“No, not really. All I asked her about was the name of the new manager.”

“Okay. That’s fine, then.”

“What are you hiding? Spit it out.”

“It’s nothing. Nothing I oughta say, anyway... But were you here in 101 all day? Anything unusual happen?”

Emi and Nord exchanged glances...and then smiled, for some reason.

“I don’t know whether it’s good or bad for you, but yes, there was one thing.”

“Huh?”

“Well, you’ll get to see for yourself later. Wanna see Alas Ramus?”

Maou peered behind Nord’s shoulder to find two small figures sleeping together by the far window, away from the light over the sink. They were Alas Ramus and Erone.

“Come on in and give them a pat on the head, why don’t you?”

Heeding Nord’s advice, Maou tiptoed his way into Room 101 and looked at the two Sephirah children. They were both in a deep sleep, having been

knocked out for a while, both of them breathing shallowly in their slumber.

“They just look like regular kids, don’t they? I’m sorry, can you turn out the light? I don’t wanna wake them.”

“This much won’t wake them up.”

He gave Alas Ramus and Erone each a caress on the head, then stealthily walked away from their futon and back to the front door.

“So what happened?”

Emi and Nord seemed calm enough that it must not have been bad news.

“I think you’ll see, once you get up to your apartment.”

“Did Urushihara do something? I would think Camio would stop him from doing anything too crazy...?”

Ashiya and Suzuno were, in a very real sense, the security team for Villa Rosa Sasazuka. With both of them in Ente Isla for the foreseeable future, there were two issues at hand. One was who’d take care of Alas Ramus, but Nord and Laila were always around, so that problem was solved. The other was Kinanna the Lenbrellebelve, and finding babysitting for *him* was more complicated.

Kinanna was a very, very ancient demon, one who’d treated even the Devil’s Regent and Maou’s father figure, Camio, as a child. Just a little demonic force would set him on a rampage, one made doubly dangerous by his enfeebled mind. But, perhaps due to the wound the mystery astronaut applied to his throat, Kinanna wasn’t able to greedily suck in demonic force the way he used to—and just like a power-starved Camio, his body had shrunk down. He was now a small lizard, even smaller than when he’d first paid a visit to Room 201. There was no longer any doubting that the stone ensconced in his throat was the Astral Gem, one of the Devil Overlord’s fabled relics. But considering what had happened in that underground lab, it was easy to see that Kinanna’s long life was intertwined with the presence of this gem.

Based on all of this, a mere human like Nord wouldn’t be able to wrangle him. Neither would Laila, who knew little of the demon realms and whose crisis management skills were questionable even in the best of times. This whittled down the candidates to Urushihara, pretty much, but his past performance

didn't exactly paint a glowing picture of his qualifications.

Camio was back in Japan after the cave visit—but while he was there, everyone wanted to be sure he had no more power than any other black chicken out there. The reason was simple: Losing his demonic force didn't make Camio human, but if he regained his normal form, the force he exuded would impact his surroundings no matter what he did. This force was still poison to Nord, and if a guy from the post office or Sasuke Express knocked on the door only to find a giant irradiative bird-person on the other side, the results would be alarming in assorted ways.

Thus they had to leave the lizard with Urushihara for now, which had kept Maou extremely anxious at work over the past two days.

"It's not something Urushihara *did*, no..."

"No, we weren't on hand to witness it, exactly. But I think you'll understand better once you look inside."

"You're being weirdly evasive..."

Raising a young Emi as a single father, then somehow managing to keep Acieth's stomach full in this strange land of Japan, Nord was actually a pretty decent cook. Other people pitched in for Kinanna's diet as well—but Maou still had his worries.

"Don't worry," Emi said. "It's not a bad thing, probably. I think Chiho will like it, too."

"...Why'd you bring up Chi?"

"Well, we all know what happened to you. She's worried about how you'll do if you decide to recuperate in that disaster area up there."

"Oh..."

"What is it?"

Maou shook his head. "Nothing. Sorry to bother you guys this late. See you later."

"Sure." Nord nodded.

“...Right. Good night,” said Emi, a little suspicious of Maou’s behavior.

Once Nord had quietly closed the door, he gave the wall a concerned look.

“He looks rather tired.”

“Well, he has too much to think about and too little he can do by himself. I’m sure it’s mentally exhausting him.”

Through the wall, they could barely hear Maou go upstairs.

“Well, at least starting today, he can really stretch out and relax when he goes to sleep.”

The moment Nord said that—

“Huhh?!”

Emi’s eyebrows arched upward at the muffled scream from the ceiling.

“I *told* him to keep it down. There’s children sleeping.”

“I think well near anyone would do the same thing...”

Alas Ramus fidgeted a bit, perhaps hearing the sound. Emi, stooping down, caressed her hair.

“Well, no point whining about it now. I mean, doesn’t he remember how long it took to plug up the giant hole this child made in the wall?”

“Huhh?!”

The moment he opened the door and turned on the light, Maou brought a terrified hand to his mouth, only remembering Alas Ramus was asleep after he let out that yell.

If he was too loud, Emi was bound to nag at him again—but who wouldn’t yell at this? If you woke up in a thoroughly trashed and broken-down apartment in the morning and came back that night to find it completely repaired, you’d be screaming, too.

“Wha... Huh...?!”

Maou checked the number outside, convinced he must’ve stepped into Suzuno’s apartment by mistake. It said “201,” no matter how many times he

looked.

“What the hell...?”

The tatami mats on the floor were brand new, the aroma from the fresh woven straw having a calming effect on his mind. The closet door now had ink-style artwork of a pine grove printed on Chinese paper, and all the walls had been repainted. The ripped-up curtains were replaced with orange blackout types that added a bright yet chic touch to the décor; when he gingerly touched them, he found there was even an inner lace curtain behind them.

But scariest of all was the new wood-floored section in one corner of the room. This three-foot-by-three-foot floor, where the apartment’s cheap plastic shelving used to be, was enclosed with a border made of two-by-four planks, similar to what washing machines were installed on in Japan as an anti-earthquake measure. Inside it was an enormous, sturdy-looking birdcage, and inside the birdcage, amid some straw placed below a basic pet heater, was a small lizard snoring loudly.

“Wha-wha-wha, this, uh... Oh, uh, Urushihara, Urushihara and Camio...”

The disturbed Maou hadn’t noticed until now that neither of them was in the room.

“U-Urushihara! Camio! Where are you? The bathroom? Hey! ...Urushihara?”

He tried to keep his voice as low as possible as he searched for them...but suddenly he felt something from the closet. A slight sense of unease, like the unexpected aroma of curry emanating from somebody’s house in town. He opened the door.

“Whoa!”

There he found a visibly shaking Urushihara cradling a black chicken, terror written across his face, as if scared of the light in the room.

Taking a closer look, he realized that his eyes were red and his hair was a silvery color. Camio, tucked in his arms, looked like a collection of dried feathers, his eyes glassy as if he was in danger of dying at any moment. Then the memory portion of Maou’s brain kicked in, instantly finding the most likely rationale for this.

“Did the landlord come in?”

“.....!!”

“.....*Chirrrr.....Hurrrr.*”

Urushihara silently nodded.

There was an envelope in the trembling Camio’s beak. The return address was from a company Maou had never heard of, but more important was the kiss mark on the front of it, like an ancient demonic seal corralling a force that must never be awakened. He felt faint as he drummed up as much mental force as he could to pick up the letter.



“Ah, um, guys, calm down,” he attempted. “It’s all right. It’s all right now.” But his own hands were shaking as he opened the envelope. Inside was a single folded sheet of paper and a thicker one with a tear-off section at the bottom.

“Gnhh...!!”

The moment he unfolded the first sheet, Maou made a strange sound from within his throat and fell backward, smashing against the spanking-new tatami and losing consciousness.

This sheet was an itemized list, and the other one was a bill slip. Among the listed entries: *Removal of the old tatami mats, chewed up and destroyed beyond repair; installation of the new mats; new paper on the closet frame; new paint on the walls; and the new animal cage.* The total at the bottom: 89,700 yen. Maou stayed conscious only long enough to read the part about how the curtains and labor were free and they could discuss a payment plan later.

If you thought about it, this was only to be expected. Amane herself saw just how wrecked Room 201 had been the other day. Laila couldn’t be blamed for taking the knocked-out Maou back to Room 201 here in Japan—and if she saw the state of her aunt’s apartment building, of *course* Amane would tell Shiba about it. This was the result.

Clearly, this was the fault of Maou and his roommates—for keeping animals in the room (a clear violation of the lease), for damaging the apartment beyond what would be repaired with normal maintenance, and for attempting to hide the fact. The damage went well beyond what would be tolerated in daily life, so if anything, Shiba’s flexibility with his payment plan was exceedingly generous.

But judging by how Urushihara had spent the whole “renovation” quivering in the closet with Camio, unable to use his computer, there was no imagining the sights he must have seen.

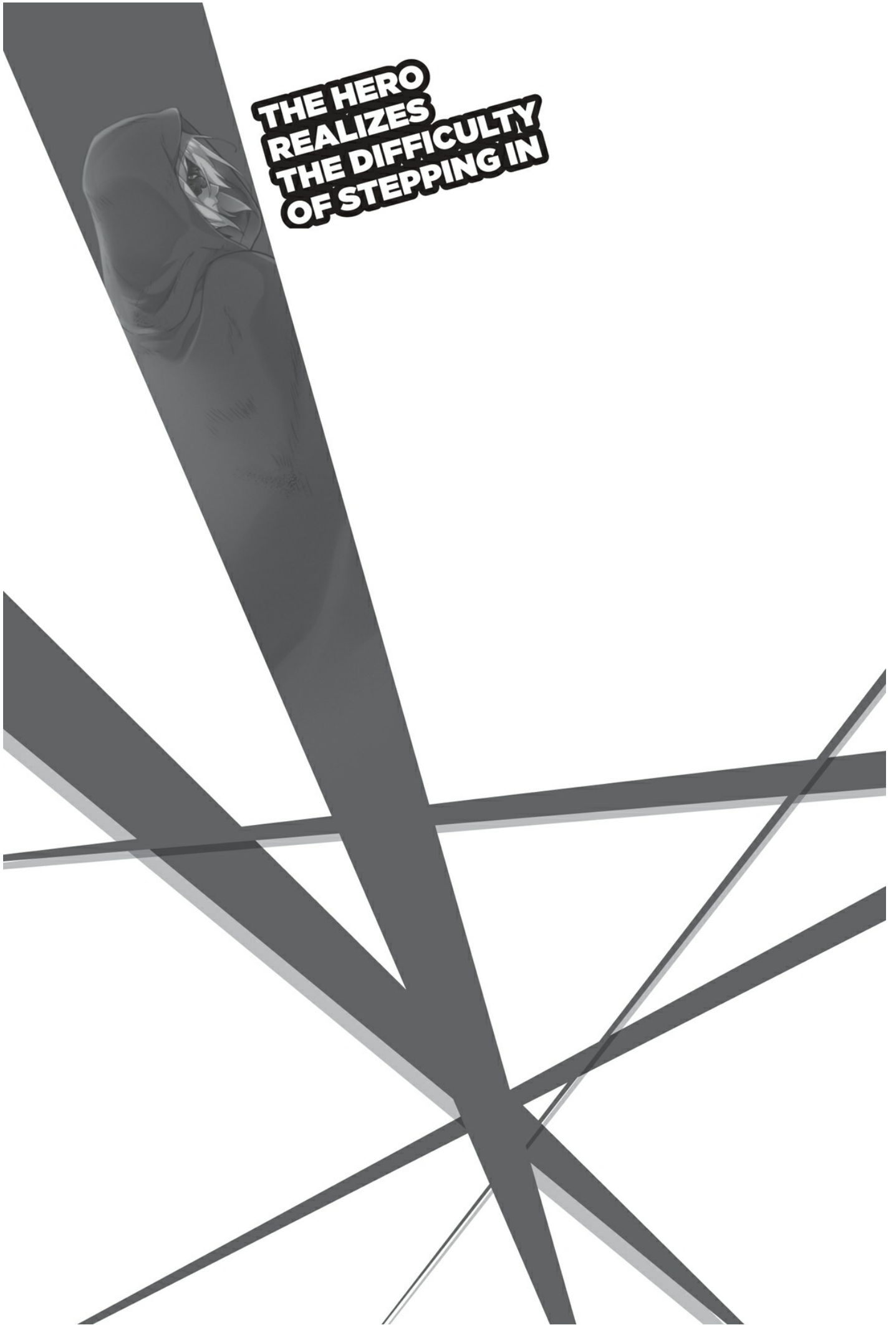
Realizing everything had gone quiet above after hearing a dull *thump*, Emi said:

“It must’ve been a big shock to him. In a lot of ways.”

“Because they’re demons?”

“Who knows?” She chuckled as she turned out the light to prepare for bed.
“I’m still not really sure myself.”

**THE HERO
REALIZES
THE DIFFICULTY
OF STEPPING IN**



THE HERO REALIZES THE DIFFICULTY OF STEPPING IN

"Gah?!"

Maou woke up to find the still-on ceiling light searing into his eyes. He winced as he looked at his wristwatch and found it to be two in the morning. He hadn't been knocked out for that long, but the repair bill for the renovations he was currently enjoying was still in his hand.

"Ooooh..."

He shook his groggy head, as Urushihara and Camio still huddled up against each other and shivered in the closet.

"Guess I'm gonna have to ask Nord or Laila tomorrow. Actually, Laila wasn't downstairs. Did she go back to Nerima?"

He had no idea what they saw, but he felt uneasy about leaving Kinanna in the care of these two after whatever they were exposed to. It would be cruel to them. Urushihara's normal behavior caused nothing but stress to Maou and Ashiya, but if the landlord was involved, they were willing to forgive anything.

"Guys, you can spend tomorrow recuperating, so just get some sleep. You're gonna mess yourselves up, curled up like that."

".....!"

".....chirrrr....."

They didn't voice any disagreement, so Maou didn't prod them any further. Thus he took his futon out from the closet, glad that the door no longer had claw marks and missing pieces to it, and lay down.

"Ooh, the tatami smells great."

The fresh straw aroma was stronger closer to the floor. It made Maou take another look at the repair list. It described these mats as "normal grade,"

manufactured in Kumamoto Prefecture down South and sized for apartments and condominiums. One mat retailed for 9,000 yen—Maou wasn't sure if this was cheap or a rip-off, but now he understood why families liked changing out their tatami on regular occasions.

“...Over 90,000 yen with tax, huh?”

Even if it *did* vastly improve Maou's living situation, it was a hard pill to swallow. No matter how much of this was Maou's (or, really, Kinanna's) fault, having this annotated invoice handed to him seemed somewhat unfair. Of course, given a lease violation like this, the landlord could've easily given him an eviction notice instead...but given that the three original tenants had proven themselves reliable, sensible renters so far, this seemed awfully one-sided.

“Ashiya's gonna be pissed... Well, I guess he was pissed already... But can we pay something like this?”

Recalling Ashiya's rage at Kinanna's tirade, Maou sat back up again and opened the cabinet under the sink. This was where valuables were stored in Devil's Castle, and Maou fished his checkbook out from inside.

“...I'm short.”

Maou brought a hand to his forehead. Shiba wrote that they could work out a payment plan, but it'd be extremely inadvisable to stretch this thing out for longer than urgently necessary. If the landlord was willing to loosen the lease terms a bit and even build a setup for Kinanna, it was Maou's job to reply with real sincerity as soon as possible, or else he'd be working in bad faith.

But...

“Mmm... I thought I had more saved up than this...”

A while back, the demons had lost nearly 40,000 yen due to Urushihara falling victim to fraudulent door-to-door salespeople. That was the food budget for Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara for two months. Since then, Maou had been working with Ashiya to save money in case of illness or other emergency—but even so, the most money they could take out all at once was at best around 80,000 yen. Next month's payday wasn't going to suddenly expand that figure, and he was already taking on no shifts for the entire month of July.

When he went to Ente Isla to rescue Emi, he was able to get compensated for his time off from her—but as a side effect of that adventure, Acieth Alla came into their lives, and Acieth could eat enough to suck up the trio’s entire food budget. Nord and the Shiba family were footing half of her food bill, but even then, Maou had to buy all sorts of business apparel for his managerial training, at least high-quality enough so he looked as good as anyone else in the classes, and that outlay hurt, too.

“And there’s no way I can borrow gold or jewels from Ente Isla...”

As Urushihara wasn’t shy about telling him, there was really no reason at all for Maou to keep diligently working in Japan. With the power of the three demons, they could bring in all kinds of stuff from Ente Isla that could be exchanged for cash. But it was impossible to believe that Miki Shiba, overseer of Earth’s Sephirah, would look upon that too kindly. Shiba, after all, had given Maou a fair amount of leeway because she wanted him and Ashiya to adapt to life in Japan. If Maou lived up to his rep in Ente Isla and wrested valuables from its people in order to repay these damages, there was every chance he’d never be allowed back again.

“Over 90,000 yen with tax... Oof. And apart from Urushihara’s credit card payment next month, there’s all the chocolate I bought for White Day. That’s a few thousand yen that’ll get withdrawn. And even if we cut costs, we need to think about Kinanna’s food... Ngh...”

Crouched down on the sparkling wooden kitchen floor, Maou stared at the numbers in his checkbook, which steadfastly refused to change for him. He was already feeling the pressure from his battle against heaven and the rapid adjustments to his work environment, and now these financial issues were making his stomach hurt.

But then he realized—something seemed off about the path he’d taken to these money issues. There was *something* they could use besides what was in his account, right? Not one-off jobs or anything like that—something more intangible. A bit like a personal check...

“...!!”

Maou stood back up, then looked down at his feet. Ever since he’d come to

Japan, he had worked hard to keep his feet on the ground, no matter what their financial situation was. And he'd put some insurance in place back then, too, hadn't he? It was time to tap that.

It was seven AM the following morning, as Emi went to pick up the newspaper Nord subscribed to, when she noticed something strange through the mail slot.

"What is it, Emilia?"

"Is there something up?"

"Mommy?"

Nord was setting up breakfast on a *kotatsu* table not much different from the one in Devil's Castle. Alas Ramus and Erone were eagerly waiting for the meal to be served. And Emi, her back turned to them, let out a sigh as she remained crouched in front of the slot.

"I'm sorry. You guys can start ahead of me."

Emi placed the newspaper on top of the shoe compartment, slipped on some sandals, then went out to the first-floor corridor.

"...What's gotten into you this early?"

Then, making sure she closed the door tightly behind her, she looked down—partly confused, partly annoyed—at the figure lying prostrate before her.

"I need a favor."

Through that mail slot, as she picked up the paper, she had spotted Maou kowtowing to the door in the early dawn, opting against ringing the bell.

"What?"

Not a day seemed to go by when it wasn't *something* with him. Emi figured it had something to do with Room 201, but still she couldn't imagine what he might say to her.

"You still owe me one, don't you?"

The wording seemed a little inappropriate for someone on his hands and knees. Emi was about to ask what kind of nonsense this was when she recalled exactly what she "owed."

“Oh. Yeah, I do. You didn’t say anything about it afterward, so I forgot about it... But was there a bike you wanted *this* early in the morning?”

What Emi owed was related to her rescue in Ente Isla. She had already paid for the work he missed, as well as the supplies and damages incurred during the operation, but Maou had also assigned her an extra “rescue fee” as her sworn nemesis—and that came in the form of a moped purchase.

“You told me yourself, right? As long as it wasn’t crazy expensive, I could pick whatever I wanted.”

“I did, but I can’t get you something commercial like a Gyro-Roof. Those go for like half a million yen new. A hundred thousand’s about the best I can do—”

Maou didn’t let her finish.

“Then change that to *this* for me!!”

Maou extended a piece of paper her way—the repair bill his landlord gave him last night. Picking up the text-heavy sheet, she looked it over with still-bleary eyes, then let out a shoulder-trembling laugh.

“Wow. Wasn’t expecting that one.”

“Say whatever you want. It’s the angels’ fault for all of this anyway.”

“Very indirectly, maybe...” Emi giggled and gave the sheet back. “But the landlord won’t mind that?”

“As long as I earn the money legally in Japan, it’ll be fine.”

There was room for debate over whether the Devil King was a valid creditor to the Hero in the eyes of Japanese law, but Emi had known him long enough.

“All right. Are you paying her directly, or does she want a bank transfer or something?”

“She gave me her account info, but I’ll be charged a fee, you know? I wanted to talk to her anyway, so I wanna contact her and pay her directly.”

“Seriously? If I’m the one owing you, you could at least act a little more like it.”

“Do you think I care about how I look right now?”

It all seemed so incredibly contradictory to Emi, but this was likely Maou's way of showing his sincerity. If it wasn't for this, she thought, he might've forgotten about the moped entirely.

"Okay, okay. I wanna talk to Ms. Shiba, too. Can I hold on to that bill? I'll go withdraw the cash."

"Yes! I can't thank you enough!"

Maou shot to his feet, hands clasped together as Emi smiled at him.

"I don't know how many times you've tried to make me feel grateful for a favor. Have you done more favors for me, or the other way around?"

"Ahh, that's another conversation. Now at least Ashiya won't yell at me!"

If Maou and his cohorts ever ran into police issues again, would she be called to save them? The memory, surfacing from so far back, made Emi smile.

"How about we do it tomorrow morning? Your shifts start in the afternoon, right?"

"Yes, the sooner the better with this. All right. By the way, were Lucifer and Camio all right? Because they were practically in a trance when I last saw them."

"They managed to fall asleep in the closet, so I think they're recovering. The hair and the feathers and stuff are back to normal."

"Well, what could've freaked them out so much? Father said a bunch of different workmen filed in and out of the place, but he didn't see anything unusual."

"I dunno, but judging by how Nord and Gabriel and Erone aren't affected by the landlord at all, there's gotta be *something* up with her that's harmful to demons."

"I know that, but if it's *that* potent, don't you want to know what it is?"

"I do, but I'm hesitant about asking her in person... Anyway, sorry. I gotta go to work, so let's figure out a time over there!"

"All right. Have fun."

Emi sighed as she watched Maou hurriedly flee once his business was done. Then she went back inside.

“I could barely hear you out there,” her father said. “What’s up?”

“Just repaying my remaining debt to him. I guess they got charged a bunch for the renovations yesterday. Whew... Sorry I took so long.”

“Want me to reheat the miso soup?”

“No, that’s all right. I need to head to the bank after I eat anyway.”

“Pank?” Alas Ramas interjected.

“No, ‘bank.’ It’s where Maou and other people put in and take out their money,” Erone clarified.

“...I don’ get it.”

“You will when you’re older, Alas Ramus.”

It was funny to see Erone act like an elder brother when even Acieth was larger than him. Emi laughed a little.

“Big? I’m a *big sis*!!”

And it was equally charming to see the protests from the ball of cuteness that was Alas Ramus.

“Wanna go on a walk with me, Alas Ramus?”

“Yeh!!”

“We won’t be going right after breakfast, so don’t hurry, okay? I have work this afternoon, so take it easy.”

“Yay! Walking!”

This isn’t the right time to bring it up, Emi thought, mentally shrugging. But she ate at Alas Ramus’s pace anyway, wolfing down Nord’s breakfast. For reasons only he knew, Erone copied the pace, showing off poor manners as he shoveled rice into his open mouth.

“Whoa, whoa, chew a little more, please,” Nord said, amused, chiding Emi as if she were a small child. The three of them exchanged looks and smiled.

Then they heard someone rapidly descending the stairs. Hearing Maou tear off to work, Emi took a sip of miso and sighed a little. *Is it really all right? To have this quiet moment in the middle of all this? Having a leisurely breakfast, preparing to head out...and I'm sure lunch and dinner will be like this, too.*

Every knight affiliated with the Church was being mobilized. Nervous excitement was in the air among everyone assembled around Devil's Castle. Ashiya, Suzuno, Emeralda, and Rumack were no doubt working hard to keep everything running. That was clear in how Suzuno hadn't sent a single message in the several days since Emi's astronaut run-in, despite sending them frequently while she was in Ente Isla. She and Emeralda's responsibilities were taking them back to the Western Island; Ashiya contacted Emi to say that they'd likely be difficult to reach.

And here they thought they had a grasp of their enemy. But she couldn't even touch that astronaut, losing badly in a one-sided battle—and yet, now just a couple days later, she was enjoying a lovely family meal, as if there were no depressing war at all.

"It's fine, Emilia."

Nord, perhaps surmising Emi's heart as her chopsticks stopped, spoke up.

"You've risked your life and worked harder than anybody in this world. You need to rest up when you've got free time like this. Rest up and wait for news from everyone else. It won't hurt you."

"...Mmm. Yeah."

How did he know?

"Believe me, I know. After enough years around you, you're pretty easy to understand."

She imagined it was that sort of thing, but she wished he wouldn't break that skill out in front of Alas Ramus too much. She was her "mother," after all.

"Grandpa? Mommy? What're you sayin'?"

"Nothing, Alas Ramus. You have some peas left on your plate."

"...Oh."

She'd left more than *some* peas. She'd left a lot of peas. Beginning to demonstrate food faves and dislikes like this was, perhaps, a sign of her growing. Or changing. Emi wasn't sure which.

"You have to eat them up, Alas Ramus. You're a big sister, right?"

"Hmm..."

Erone was just as big an eater as Acieth. His plate was clean; Emi wondered if he'd licked every drop of sauce off of it. Looking at it, then her plate, Alas Ramus groaned.

Emi was still troubled over how to deal with situations like this, but Nord stepped up first.

"I don't want her to be a picky eater, but maybe they've gotten cold enough that the butter congealed. Here, let Grandpa heat 'em back up for you."

Nord must've still been in his forties, but he really had the role of Grandpa down pat. It was funny to see in person.

"Well, I guess it comes down to doing it, or not doing it. If you don't like any path besides the ideal one, you're never gonna get anywhere, huh?"

Looking at the back of her father as he recooked the peas in a small frying pan, adding just a few kernels of frozen corn to spice things up, Emi recalled back when Alas Ramus had first merged herself with her holy sword. At first, the concept of raising a toddler when she'd barely interacted with children in her life had distressed her. Could she really do it? There had been many, many mistakes—but thanks to the aid of Suzuno and Chiho, Maou and Ashiya, and (more or less) Urushihara, most of the child-rearing had become routine. Her mind was less troubled now.

"Just do what you do, and sooner or later, you'll reach something, I guess."

"Right, all set. Still got room for these, Alas Ramus?"

"Okeh!"

The buttery smell of the sautéed peas and corn convinced Alas Ramus to devour them at remarkable speed, considering her earlier refusal. Watching the child chow down, astonished by her father's good judgment, Emi decided to

make up for the fat and salt in the morning with something a little healthier for lunch.

“Hello there—*oh* ...”

At four forty-five in the afternoon that day, Emi arrived at work to replace the lunch shift, only to run into Iwaki for the first time. She was a small woman, wearing glasses and her full-time managerial uniform, but she didn’t notice Emi come in at first. Instead, she was staring intently at a job listing magazine, writing something on a sheet of paper.

“Uhhh...”

Emi regretted breaking the woman’s concentration, but she had to grab her attention sometime.

“Oh! Uh, um, hello there. My name is Iwaki, and I’m the new transfer to this location.”

With that hurriedly spoken self-intro, Iwaki stood up.

Emi bowed her own head. “My name’s Emi Yusa. It’s good to meet you.”

“Yusa... Oh! Yes, I hear you’re our best employee on the phone.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I’m best or anything...”

It must’ve been Kisaki who’d given her that awkward-to-accept praise.

“I’m still new here after all, as of four months ago. There’s still a lot I don’t know yet, so thanks in advance for your guidance.”

That wasn’t her being modest. She had never considered herself the best before, and while Maou and the rest of the team helped her get used to things behind the counter, whether that was getting fed back into her customer service skills was still an open question. There were still a lot of items on the regular menu she hadn’t even tried for herself yet. She still felt firmly in new-hire territory.

“...!”

But surprise seemed to register behind Iwaki’s glasses anyway.

“Ms. Iwaki?”

“...Sorry. Thank you as well. Ms. Kisaki will be here to help with the handover again this evening, but we’ll be a little short-staffed for the start of the dinner rush, so hang in there.”

“Sure thing,” Emi meekly replied, before moving on to the changing room. Iwaki gave her a nod as she left before diligently returning to her writing project.

Looking at the schedule, Emi saw that she, Maou, Akiko, and Kawata were on duty. Chiho was due in at six PM, and if Kisaki was also around later, the shift wasn’t as short-staffed as Iwaki let on—a relief to Emi. She didn’t think their first meeting went badly at all, but Iwaki did seem to have this vague sense of irritable impatience she couldn’t quite grasp.

“Hey, Emi. Sorry about this morning,” Maou said from the counter as she went toward the staff room.

“Sure, sure. I’m all set, so we can meet anytime tomorrow. I just said hello to Ms. Iwaki.”

“Oh? Did she say anything?”

“No, just hello.”

Emi raised a curious eyebrow. Maou’s, meanwhile, were slanted downward—but he quickly shook it off.

“Oh. Well, all right, then.”

“Look, what’s been occupying you since yesterday? You’ve clearly been hiding something.”

“Sorry. I’m not hiding it, exactly...”

The apology was an unusually sincere one for him.

“...but you’ll probably find out tonight. I’m sorry, I can’t stop wondering about it.”

He was being just as vague as ever, but the context was clear enough to Emi—something about the workplace was troubling Maou.

“All right, all right. I don’t know what it is, but I’m sure life’s never easy for a

shift manager—oops, I got a call.”

A delivery call beeped its way to Emi’s headset. She jogged over to the order station. It was a group order from a regular customer, a small company a fair distance from the MgRonald; they could handle it, but if both Maou and Kawata were doing a delivery at the same time, things could get a little hairy.

“Maybe I should get my license,” Emi said to herself after the call was over and Maou had headed out. Thanks to her previous experience, she was semi-dedicated to taking phone orders at the moment, although other crewmembers handled that job as well. The day shifts were often manned by married women with driver’s licenses, but with the night staff—younger and having more irregular shift schedules—only Maou and Kawata were qualified to do deliveries, which seemed like an issue to Emi. She knew the company would cover her costs if she applied for a license (Maou had told her a million times), so there wouldn’t be any harm in trying.

Interrupting her thoughts about this came a chirp of “Good evening!” from Akiko. Emi gave the biggest smile she could from behind her counter. But internally, she was trembling. Even a newbie with four months’ experience saw what this was—the first signs of the dinner-rush peak. Losing Maou at this exact moment was beyond inopportune.

Emi used her handset to call in Iwaki for help. Quickly seeing what was up, the manager flew right out.

“One Hanami Burger coming right up!”

“Okay, out of 10,000... I need a check on a 10,000-yen bill, please!”

“Yes, your Happiness Set will come with one of the toys here... I apologize, ma’am, but unfortunately you’re not able to choose your toy with this promotion... Yes, they’re packaged like this, you see, so sadly, I’m not able to see what they are. My apologies for that...”

“Thank you for calling MgRonald at Hatagaya Station! This is Yusa speaking! Is this a delivery order?”

“Hi, guys! I’ll open up the other register! ...I’ll take the next customer over here, please!”

“Sorry for the delay. We’ll bring it to you when it’s ready, so if you can put this number card on your table...”

“Marko’s out? Kawacchi, you stay here; I’ll handle this one. So it’s a cola, a small shake, and...three pies...”

“One Teriyaki Chicken Burger and one Big Mag set to go! Thanks for your patience!”

Dinner tonight was a razor’s-edge battle. Emi, Akiko, and Kawata knew that Chiho and Kisaki were on hand now, but the more staff they had on hand, the more customers came in to distract their attention. Nobody had a moment to breathe.

Despite that, the presence of Iwaki did a lot to keep everything together. When Kisaki’s departure was first announced, people had started whispering their concerns about whether the new manager had much on-the-floor experience, but those doubts had proved baseless. No matter what it was, Iwaki did it quickly and accurately. The smoothness of her teamwork was astonishing for only her second day on the job; she immediately knew where all the machines and condiments were.

The waves of customers finally receded a bit around nine in the evening.

Emi was finally able to chat a bit with Chiho. “Tonight sure was something, huh?”

“Oh, man, I’m so sweaty.”

Iwaki, finally at ease a little, suddenly sounded far more casual. “It’s amazing to see how slammed we can get when everything comes together. I went up and down the stairs so many times, my legs are aching.”

In the end Maou, Kisaki, and Kawata were out ferrying deliveries for most of the past few hours, so there weren’t enough people to man the café counter upstairs at all times. Iwaki was wearing short-heeled pumps, as befitted her manager’s uniform, so her legs must’ve been killing her.

“But it’s rare for delivery and upstairs to max out at the same time like this,” Chiho said. “It’s rare enough for all of the bikes to be out, so I think today was just an unusually busy dinner.”

“Yeah,” agreed Akiko, “it’s not like there were more customers than usual, but they all had pretty heavy orders. I don’t think those numbers would keep us this busy normally.”

“We *are* getting more deliveries lately, though. And I think we’re seeing all three bikes in use at once more often.” Emi smiled. “But with our location, even if we got more bikes, I’m not sure where we’d put them.”

“Oh, right.”

Iwaki nodded at the three women’s evaluations before bringing up the journal screen on a register to look up the night’s stats.

“Actually getting to experience this location is something else...”

“Oh?”

“I mean, I knew the trends based on past sales numbers and so on, but now that I’m *in* here, it’s still pretty surprising.” Iwaki adjusted her glasses and sighed. “It’s not just the number of customers after all.”

Emi wasn’t sure how to respond, but judging by how Iwaki looked, it seemed to give her serious food for thought. She hesitated to give too casual a reply. Kisasi’s performance, she knew, went beyond the call of duty for a single location manager; maybe the new girl felt under pressure. Chiho picked up on this, giving Iwaki a concerned expression—but, Emi thought, Chiho looked kind of anxious herself. And Maou seemed to suggest that all his murky concerns would become clear once Chiho was around—did this have to do with it?

“.....”

Between Maou, Chiho, and Iwaki, having these people mope around all evening made things tremendously uncomfortable for Emi. But the next moment:

“Once! Once, this was the curtain for a stage that sent my heart soaring, illuminating the castle of my goddess in the twilight!”

“Huh? What?!”

The sudden booming tenor made Iwaki take a step back, head lifted.

“But what about now? With every night, as the curtain falls once and again,

the day my goddess and I are separated grows ever closer, a merciless song from the depths of hell itself!”

“Whoa...”

“Ahh...”

“Ohh...”

“What happened?!”

Chiho, Emi, and Akiko immediately knew who this was, their faces instantly going blank. It was another poem of love from Sariel, for what seemed like the first time in ages. He rarely showed up at night, so a lot of customers caught unawares were now staring at the front door. Emi and Chiho looked around for Kanako Furuya, shift manager at Sentucky and a girl who had proved a worthy overseer for Sariel—but unluckily for them, she apparently wasn’t at work tonight.

“And ah, hello there, Ms. Iwaki! Thank you again for this morning! And who do I see but Sasaki, and Yusa, and Ohki. I hastened over once I was sure your wave of evening traffic had subsided!”

“Uh. Ah. Yes, thank you. Um, you’re Mr. Sarue, correct?”

It wasn’t unnatural for the manager at a rival fast-food outlet to come in here as a customer. It *was* unnatural to go about it like this. Iwaki’s mind had difficulty keeping up. Judging by what they said, they were already familiar with each other, but nobody must’ve told Iwaki about *this* aspect of Sarue’s personality. Emi and Chiho gave each other looks, silently agreeing with each other. No, even if she *was* told, there was no way she’d believe it unless she saw it for herself.

Chiho stepped up. “Yusa, Ohki, I’ll handle this.”

“All right. Don’t worry, Manager. Chiho will cover for you.”

“Huh? Uh, wh-what? Are you sure you want to?”

“It’ll be fine. Oh, I’m gonna go check on the freezer with Emi-Yu.”

Seeing Chiho volunteering to take the brunt of this while Akiko and Emi stepped back made it impossible for Iwaki to hide her concern. But Akiko and

Emi had their antennae out in case anything happened. Depending on how Sarue chose to act, Iwaki might have every right to call the authorities and ban him from the premises—commonsense measures, really—and Chiho wouldn't be able to stop her, assuming she thought it best to. For now, this approach was the best.

“...Good evening, Mr. Sarue. Are you having dinner with us tonight?”

Sariel would usually break out a bouquet of flowers right about now. But upon closer observation, he was dressed in a suit today and looking, well, as normal a member of society as he ever could.

“No, ma'am, I actually have something for Maou.”

That was why his opening serenade seemed so out of place—and why was he busting *that* out if his business was with Maou?

Chiho, well familiar with Sariel by now, cut right to the chase. “Maou? You didn't say all that weird stuff because you wanted to see Ms. Kisaki?”

“Realizing,” he explained, “the day will come shortly when Ms. Kisaki will be nowhere to be found in here is enough to tear apart my heart. Those stark emotions just naturally emanate from my lips, you see. Of course, if I *could* see Ms. Kisaki, I would wish for nothing else, but...”

This was already setting off Chiho's danger sensors. She felt an urgent need to nail Sariel down as much as she could before he tried anything funny.

“...Well, Ms. Iwaki is a normal person, okay? If you mess up and she calls the police, I'm not gonna be able to cover for you.”

“I am fully aware of that, trust me. Did you think I would do anything as rude as that to a woman who's such a cutie in a pair of glasses?”

Did anyone use the word *cutie* these days? And didn't he realize that what he did just a few seconds earlier was “rude” to everyone in the dining area? Chiho resisted the urge to begin lecturing him and opted to stick only with what needed to be said.

“Well, Mr. Sarue, all those habits of yours were something that Ms. Kisaki tolerated strictly because she's Ms. Kisaki. And now that Ms. Iwaki's here, you

should really avoid singing songs about how much you lament Ms. Kisaki being gone.”

“Hee-hee-hee! Take heart, then, Chiho Sasaki. I am hardly as imprudent a man as that.”

He was certainly dedicated to Kisaki, but exactly how “imprudent” he was, was worthy of debate.

“I intend to build a beneficial relationship with her as a fellow member of the industry. The impression I give after Ms. Kisaki leaves will be vital for what comes later... Ms. Kisaki... She’s leaving... *Ohhh...!*”

Immediately after declaring himself prudent, the angel was about to collapse on the floor and bawl. Chiho wasted no time.

“Don’t sprawl out on the counter and cry, please. You’re bothering our other customers. If you had something for Maou, I could take it from you, but...ah.”

Just as she flatly stated her warning, Maou stepped in, motorcycle helmet in hand.

“Maou, Mr. Sarue is here.”

“Oh, perfect.”

He put the helmet and his insulated delivery bag back in their respective places, noticing in his peripheral vision that Iwaki was watching as he approached Sarii.

“Sorry to bother you while you’re busy and all, Sarue.”

“...Say, Maou, what day is today?”

“April the second.”

“If only it wasn’t so...”

“It’s officially Ms. Iwaki’s location as of April first.”

“*Pleeeeeeease* tell me it’s a lie...”

“Even if I did, it wouldn’t change reality, you know. Oh, is this it?”

Chiho was too distracted by the first new love song from Sarii in a while to

notice, but there was a manila envelope in the man's hand. Fishing it out from him as he sobbed at the counter, Maou opened it up and looked inside.

"Thanks. I appreciate this," he said with a businesslike tone—and then placed a hand on the shoulder of the inconsolable angel and smiled. "Sorry to put you through the trouble. If you want, I can treat you to a cup of coffee."

"I want one poured by Ms. Kisaki!!"

"All right, all right. She's out on deliveries right now, so you're gonna need to wait, okay? I'll ask her to make one."

"Ah...ahh...nnnngh..."

Maou was acting oddly nice to Sariel. That itself was a creepy sight, but his whisperings must've had the intended effect, because Sariel meekly followed Maou up to the second floor.

"Wh-what was that about?"

Just as Chiho found herself totally lost, Maou's voice spoke up in her headset.

"Sorry for the trouble, but when Ms. Kisaki comes back, can someone tell her to head upstairs for me?"

"All right. I'll tell her... Oh, actually, she's back now. Ms. Kisaki!"

Kisaki walked back in from a delivery run. Chiho gave Emi in the kitchen a quick nod and went up to her. The news that Sarue was crying upstairs made her laugh.

"Oh, all right. Emi-yu, got a moment?"

"Yes?" Emi asked, Iwaki next to her.

"Sorry, but can you back up Ms. Iwaki? Aki and everyone else, stay on the first floor for me. Ms. Iwaki, I'd like you to go about halfway up the stairs, if you could. You'll get a better picture of what he's *really* like then."

"Um... Huh?"

"It's all right, Manager. I'll be there with you."

"Huhh?"

Iwaki, not at all sure what was going on, was pulled out from behind the counter by Emi, who took her a few steps up as instructed.

“Okay, I’ll go up,” Kisasi agreed.

“M-*Ms.* Kisasiiiiiiii...!”

“Eep!”

Iwaki was visibly shaken by the sudden iridescent groan above, mixed with happiness and sadness like a film of heavy oil on the surface of the sea.

“It’s all right. Generally, he only acts like that with *Ms.* Kisasi, so...”

Emi, realizing her role, gave Iwaki a little support, attempting to ease her trepidation.

“I—I—what will I ever do? Ohhh...”

“I hope you’ll treat *Ms.* Iwaki well for me, for one. You like an *Americano*, right?”

They could just barely make out Kisasi and Sarii’s conversation.

“*Mr.* Sarue is, um...capable of separating work from his private life, more or less. He’s got someone watching over him at his own workplace. I know the impression he’s giving you, but don’t be too scared of him, please...”

Emi had no personal interest in being a character witness in Sarii’s favor, but she needed to be sure Iwaki wouldn’t be too alarmed by *Mr.* Sarue, an erstwhile manager from across the street.

Iwaki nodded at this, still a little distantly. “No, um...*Ms.* Kisasi *did* tell me about this. But he’s acting so differently from when he said hello earlier today, and...you know, it’s something of a shock, actually seeing someone carry on like that...”

The thought was on Emi’s mind, too, not to mention everyone else who worked at the Hatagaya Station franchise. As she thought about this, a grinning Maou came downstairs, leaving Sarii alone with Kisasi. “I know it’s pretty surprising at first,” he said, “but he really is polite. He just tends to be...more flowery when he’s talking to women, is all. If you ever feel like you can’t handle him, most of the crew’s used to him, so feel free to let any of them handle it.”

“Okay...” Iwaki stood there another moment. “...But thanks. I’m good now.”

She listened to Kisaki and Sarue’s conversation, a thoughtful if confused look on her face.

“I’ve worked for years in big, high-volume locations like this one. I’ve had to deal with lots of unusual characters in my time, and I can deal with them as neighbors without having to count on you all the time. Thanks.”

““?””

Despite her declaration, Iwaki still didn’t look fully recovered from the first impact. But if she said so, Maou and Emi had no reason to convince her otherwise.

“I’ll be in the back handling some business. If anything comes up, let me know,” Iwaki said, and all they could do was watch her as she went to the staff room.

“It must have really thrown her,” a worried Emi noted.

“It’d throw me more if it didn’t,” Maou countered, crossing his arms. “But it’d be weird if we intervened any further than this. Let’s go downstairs. We can’t have Chi and the rest by themselves down there.”

“Right.”

Down below, Chiho was on tenterhooks waiting for them.

“Um, M-Ms. Kisaki looked really troubled just now. Is she all right?”

“I...think she is. Right?”

“Y-yes, probably.”

Seeing the kind of impact someone like Sariel had on a normal, sensible person made it impossible for Maou or Emi to avow that all was well. Emi noticed even before Sariel’s appearance that Iwaki was acting unusual today, which made that even truer.

“So what did Sariel have?”

“Oh, this?” Maou had the envelope tucked under an arm. “There’s actually something I want to show the two of you later. Maybe when we go see the

landlord tomorrow. Actually...you're on spring break, right, Chi? Do you have some time tomorrow morning?"

"Sure, no problem, but what's up?"

"Well, I'm not exactly proud of this, but I'm gonna go apologize to the landlord."

"Huh?"

Maou gave her a quick summary of the state of Room 201 after their demon-realm trouble, how the landlord found out, and the measures she'd taken in response.

"I'm gonna use Emi's debt to me to repay that, but while I do, I think it'd be a good chance to quell some misgivings I have. So I asked Sariel for something before I went to work this morning."

He poked a finger at the envelope.

"I dangled a chance at some Kisaki-brewed coffee in his face."

"Wha?"

Despite everything before, this almost felt like the first time Maou had done anything "evil" in her eyes. Perhaps noticing her response, Maou averted his eyes, a little bashful.

"I feel bad for Ms. Kisaki and Ms. Iwaki, but don't you think it's a small price to pay if it means Sariel's gonna protect this street for the next three years?"

"Well, *maybe*, but..."

Chiho sounded gruff. He *had* kind of sucked Kisaki in unawares.

"Hey, I asked him for a little insurance when we went to rescue Emi, too, remember?"

"Right, right, I understand. So what's in the envelope?"

Maou looked away, checking on Akiko and Kawata first before he proceeded. "Well," he whispered, "if you take the stories Sariel, Gabriel, Laila, and Urushihara gave us and put them together, they don't match up in some spots."

"Don't match up?"

“Right. With everything that went on, it’s gotten really clear that a lack of information can be lethal to us. I want to collate everything we’ve heard about before and organize what we know into one neat package. So I had Sarii summarize everything he knows about the heavens for me. I’ll put it against what Emi’s heard later and work it into a single narrative—and along those lines, there are a few things I need to hear the landlord’s take on.”

“About heaven?” Emi asked.

Maou nodded. “In particular, if you’re gonna be taking a step back, I wanna be sure we have a firm grasp on our situation. Because we’re not gonna see as much of each other before too long, you know? I wanna make sure I put as little worry on you as possible.”

A startled Chiho looked up at Maou, before bringing her face back down.

“So you heard from Ms. Kisasi?”

“Yeah.”

“What? What is it?”

Emi was thrown by the sudden dark air around the two of them. But Chiho looked up at her, her eyes filled with determination.

“I’m quitting at the end of April.”

“What...?!”

It was April of her third and final year in high school. Emi had imagined this many times, but actually hearing it from Chiho’s mouth shook her.

“For my exams...and for next year. So...”

“Chiho...”

“So right now, I’m going to do my part. So I can show you guys *I’ve* been working hard, too, when you’re done with your battle. So...”

There was strong resolve in Chiho’s eyes, along with a twinge of loneliness.

“I’ve done everything I could back at the zirga. After that, I’m just going to pray that you two come back winners.”



“I called a sales rep I know from the help-wanted magazines, and she was kind enough to help us squeeze into at least one of them. For all the others, they’ll come out in two weeks, but...”

After Sarue left (only with the greatest of reluctance), Kisasi and Iwaki were facing each other at the McGonald back office, discussing the shifts ahead.

“Thank you very much,” Kisasi said. “I appreciate that. But losing five people—the kind of people who can deal with the wave we had today... Just thinking about it makes my stomach hurt. Sasaki in particular is an amazing young girl.”

“But she’s definitely leaving, right?”

“Well, she’s almost done with high school. I doubt her parents would let her stay, and she’s pretty strong-willed anyway. If she says she’s leaving, all the convincing in the world won’t change her mind.”

“Yeah...”

Iwaki was already petite enough, but right now she seemed like an even smaller presence in the room.

“Despite business conditions, the budget we have for people is trending downward. Even if we have a pretty decent headcount, we should try to keep expanding as much as we can while the current regional manager is in place. I get the impression that manager is going to be transferred soon as well.”

“A-all right.”

“Our most stable presences in the evening crew are Maou and Yusa. Kawata can be relied upon, too, but he’s in his last year of college and he told me he’ll be taking over his family’s business upon graduation, so relying on him too much could hurt you later on. Ohki’s a college junior this year, so she may need to start the job hunt this summer.”

“...Students start the job search that early? I forgot about that.”

“Well, there’s been talk about efforts to delay that more to the summer of year four, but that hasn’t been followed in practice at all. One of our staff told us that he got an informal offer from a big manufacturing firm in March of his junior year.”

Kisaki discussed a few other handover-related staff issues before wrapping up with this:

“The tough thing here is that all the crewmembers we have here right now are ‘matured.’ Even if you have to force it a little, I want them to reflect *your* style as soon as possible, Ms. Iwaki, not mine.”

“...Will that work all right?” a nervous Iwaki asked.

Kisaki firmly nodded. “If you lose anyone as a result, they wouldn’t have stuck around for very long anyway.”

“...!”

“I have cards for the reps from other help-wanted mags in that file. I told them in advance that we’ll have a new manager, so I think they’ll understand the situation. We have a fair amount of freedom with the layout in the paper editions, so as long as you’re not asking for an exorbitant amount, one phone call to the regional manager should get you all the advertising budget you need.”

Their conversation continued on awhile longer.

An hour later, at ten in the evening:

“Great job today, you guys. Chi, are you done for the day?”

Chiho and Emi were at the first-floor counter.

“Ah, yes, it’s ten PM. You’re off, right, Sasaki?”

“I am, thanks.”

“So am I today. Wanna go home together?”

For a moment, Chiho recalled how Kisaki took a different way home than she did.

“I have some stuff to discuss.”

But Chiho decided to humor her, so the two of them left the MgRonald together, as Emi, Akiko, and Iwaki watched them go.

“Ms. Iwaki?” Emi asked, noting the slightly stolid expression on the new manager.

“...Oh, sorry. Is Maou upstairs?”

“No, he’s out on a delivery. We’re heading up whenever customers do.”

“All right... Would anyone mind if I went up there while I have a chance?”

“Huh?”

The request confused Akiko, but Emi cut her off with her nodding.

“That’s just fine.”

“Sorry. This is my first location with the café setup, so I wanted to see how things look in operation while things are quiet.”

With that brisk statement, she went upstairs, not waiting for a response.

“I wonder why she did that? It’s not like there’s much to do up there by now.”

Ten in the evening was too early to begin the closing procedure, but there weren’t any customers to serve, either. Heading up wouldn’t seem to accomplish very much.

“Well, maybe there’s stuff that managers like her can do. Or maybe she’s checking on things she’s taking over from Ms. Kisaki.”

“Ah, yeah, maybe. She *is* working hard to keep the current atmosphere Ms. Kisaki’s got going.”

Most of the crew already understood that, at the very least, Iwaki was a crew-oriented manager, not the type to avoid hands-on work.

Emi said suddenly, “Um, I’m gonna go up, too.”

“Huh?”

The sight of Emi leaving the counter honestly surprised Akiko.

“You oughta be fine,” Kawata said from the kitchen. “Us, no, but you’re still new around here. We’re too influenced by Ms. Kisaki.”

“Oh.” Now Akiko understood. “Yeah, that could make things difficult.”

“Right. Even if you don’t mean them to be.”

“But I get it. Ms. Iwaki isn’t that much older than us, after all. Ms. Kisaki always seemed like she’s from another world, but Ms. Iwaki feels more like me

in the near future. Ahh...”

Former coworker Kotaro Nakayama had scored a job offer as a college junior—and meanwhile, Maou had failed in his bid at the managerial track. Knowing that had made Akiko a bit nervous about her future career.

“No way I could ever work full-time!”



Chiho and Kisaki were walking notably more slowly than usual. Kisaki wanted to talk things over with Chiho, but as the store manager, she *also* didn’t want a high school girl wandering around alone late at night.

“Well? Think you can get along with Ms. Iwaki?”

“I think she seems really nice. I want to do whatever I can for her...but to be honest, I feel kind of bad about breaking the news to her on her first day.”

“Oh, there was no avoiding that. We anticipated it anyway, and I’m sure it’s better for her to know sooner than later.”

They were talking about when Chiho announced her departure.

“Really, I ought to thank your parents for letting you work the entirety of April. If you’re from Sasahata North High, that could put you in competition for Tokyo or Kyoto University if you started studying right now, couldn’t it?”

“No way I could manage that. There was a guy one year ahead of me who got into Kyoto last year, but he needed two tries to get in.”

The school put up a big banner by the teachers’ offices to congratulate him for it, this boy whose name and face were unfamiliar to Chiho. It was like he had won gold in the Olympics.

“But my grades aren’t *that* good, and I’m not part of any big-name sports team or anything. I think that’s partly why nobody’s really put a lot of pressure on me about college exams yet.”

“That’s still pretty impressive.”

“What do you mean?” a curious Chiho asked.

“I mean, the adults around you are giving a lot of respect to the decisions you

make. They believe you're being serious about the path you choose for your future, even if you keep working into the first semester of your final year. Normally, now's about the time when people would tell you to start focusing on exams."

"Well, honestly, you're the first person to say that to me, Ms. Kisaki. My mom just told me to think it over and not push myself too much."

"It's too bad more people can't say that. My parents definitely put the pressure on me. Of course, as long as my school grades beat Himeko Tanaka's, that was fine by me, more or less, so whatever she was bad at, I was, too."

Kisaki smiled at the memory of her youthful transgressions.

"I might have told you this before, but I'm probably giving you the most irresponsible advice out of all the adults in your life. So keep that in mind when I say that you should really go to as high-level of a university as you possibly can. No matter *what* path you pick for the future."

Chiho had discussed that future with Kisaki before. If Chiho was choosing this moment, just before leaving her job, to look all distressed as she asked for more advice, you didn't need Kisaki's intuition to realize that here was a girl with some qualms about the next few years.

"How did you decide which universities you could get into, Ms. Kisaki?"

"Well...the normal way is all I can tell you. I went to the test prep center, I took practice exams, and I compared my results with the college acceptance standards. I used that to pick the subjects I was best at, I looked at the exam schedules, and I whittled them down to the ones available for me to take. Even back then, I wanted to run my own restaurant, but I had no idea what that entailed. I just kind of figured I should get into some kind of management or commerce major...but looking back, I didn't think too deeply about it."

"Oh, no?"

That was a surprising answer. Kisaki took what was probably the most common method to picking her future path, one that countless other people took.

"Why would I? Ten years ago, I was a teenage girl, too. I wasn't old enough to

think too deeply about anything. It wasn't in my nature then."

Chiho all but assumed Kisaki had this mature sort of personality ever since kindergarten. It was rude to think, but she couldn't imagine Kisaki as a teen in high school at all.

"So I was kind of a slacker teen, but I worked hard in college. I wasn't valedictorian or anything, but still... Not that this is too worth bragging about, but I never *failed* any of my classes. Full credit load every semester. Boy, I haven't thought about college credits in years. Do you know what a full credit load means?"

Chiho shook her head.

"It means," Kisaki said with a nostalgic smile, "I took as many courses as time allowed, I showed up to every lecture, and I didn't fail an exam or miss a report once."

"Oh... Isn't that kind of the normal thing to do?"

"Oddly enough, it's not that rare to mess up in college. For instance, maybe your term paper gets rejected, or your professor's a stickler about attendance and fails you for missing too many lectures. But if you can keep a clean record up to your junior year, that helps a *lot* with the job search. Once you get to your senior year, your course load isn't so bad, so you have a lot more time to find one."

The college advice from Emi and Rika's coworker Maki Shimizu was a breath of fresh air for Chiho. Kisaki's, on the other hand, was fresh from a different angle. Feeling they had sufficiently broken the ice, Chiho took a step closer to her main topic.

"Um... Do you mind if I ask a strange question?"

Kisaki gave her an oddly mischievous grin, as if expecting this.

"If it's about whether I have a guy or not, not right now, no."

Chiho's face reddened at having her motivations so easily guessed. But her curiosity still prevailed.

"Not 'right now,' huh?"

“Again, not to brag, but I was pretty popular at school.”

Chiho could imagine. If Kisaki wasn’t popular, nobody would be. But judging by her expression, the memory wasn’t a rosy one.

“But it’s funny. Guys would ask to date me, but then *they* were always the ones who left *me*. It was the same pattern, over and over. It just made me want to laugh—like, why’re they all so enthusiastic about going through the motions?”

“Really? You’re kidding me!”

“Apparently they didn’t realize how ‘scary’ I was until they started dating me. That and I wasn’t charming enough, or whatever.”

If Sarel had heard this, he would surely have delivered his divine judgment upon the men in question immediately.

“And I was never that interested in deep romance, so maybe people saw me as too detached. Usually, when we broke up, it was after talking about our stances toward studying, and the future. So I had boyfriends, but for the most part, I think I spent my whole college life with Himeko and Yuki. Honestly, I don’t even remember most of what I did with guys.”

Chiho wondered why, despite all that, Kisaki still refused to call Himeko her friend.

“All my life, I’ve lived for nobody besides myself. I never entertained the idea that I should worry about someone else when contemplating my future. So I kind of doubt I can give you the answers you’re looking for right now, Chi.”

By this point, Chiho had to concede it. Kisaki had all but read her mind.

“Just—feel free to take this as the opinion of some girl who’s ten years older than you—but it’s extremely rare for any high school romance to stick around for the long term.”

“.....!”

But having it spelled out in black and white like this made her blush.

“And even if you’re one of those rare cases—when you graduate and it’s time to consider the future, you should really only think about yourself. Because in

the end, that'll help out Marko, too."

"Yeah...yeahhhh..."

And now Maou's name came up.

"He might've told you already, but I invited Marko to join me in my future business."

"Um, yes, he told me a little about it."

"Marko turned me down, but looking back, I guess he didn't, necessarily."

Kisaki had interpreted Maou's response correctly. Chiho knew that.

"To be honest, even if I launched my place in the best possible circumstances, for the first few years I'm not gonna be able to pay Marko anywhere near the going rate for someone his age. And there's every chance we'll shut down, too. If you're trying to stay with Marko your whole life, I think *you're* gonna need a foundation you can make money off of, or else it's gonna be unstable in a lot of ways."

A foundation you can make money off of. In Japan, that likely meant one thing.

"A full-time career?"

Chiho had mulled over those words many times in the past year. It wasn't something she ever directly addressed, but in her dreams and the future she longed for, she just couldn't do away with that term.

"Yes, and one with the best salary and benefits you can manage, too. If you want a job at a company like that, it's best to attend a well-known, high-level university. And maybe you don't have much idea about what kind of business you want to work for yet, but when you do, you'll wanna be able to have your choice of them. Otherwise, you'll have wasted your time."

She may have been wording them differently, but Kisaki was saying the exact same things Maki Shimizu had told Chiho earlier. They couldn't have known each other. If they were both in agreement, this must've been the most common way of thinking about the issue.

"And now that we're at this point, I can tell you—when I first looked at your

résumé, Chi, I had no expectations whatsoever. It was the same kind of by-the-book résumé anyone your age would write. It's not like you'd have a lot to write down."

"Oh?"

"But that all changed during our interview. Do you remember what you talked about?"

"Um, not really."

She recalled how much trouble she'd had answering Kisasi's questions, and how she'd assumed she had blown it. Looking back, she thought the topic of her extracurricular activities came up, but she forgot all the details.

"You told me you wanted to make money for the things you hoped for. When I heard that, I thought, 'Wow, this is a real capable kid.'"

"I said that?!"

"Mm-hmm."

"Ohh... That sounds like I was just in it for the money."

Come to think of it, that was another thing she'd beaten herself up over after the interview. She had talked way too frankly about money, and recalling it made her scowl.

But Kisasi shook her head. "You didn't 'just' want the money. You wanted to *make* money. I could tell you were incredibly nervous. You were having trouble stringing together what you wanted to say, but even as you did, you talked about making money so you could buy equipment for your archery team."

"That—that sounds pretty much like the same thing to me."

"It couldn't be more different," Kisasi declared. "You fully understood that you had to *work*, or else you couldn't get the kind of money you were hoping for."

"Isn't that pretty much...normal?"

"I wish it were. It's not, for the most part. Otherwise, we wouldn't print the hourly wage in the biggest font possible in our want ads. I'm not gonna blame

high school kids for not getting it, but you wouldn't believe how many college students, how many grown-ups, mistake being 'employed' for getting money that doesn't even exist yet."

This struck a chord with Chiho. She recalled how her friend Yoshiya did a far-too-optimistic calculation of what she'd make per day, getting all jealous about it.

"And everyone talks about how they want money while they're chatting or whatever. I mean, I buy lottery tickets regularly. It'd be great if I had some income I didn't need to work for. But if you want money, you gotta seriously work for it. If you're working under awful work conditions or your salary's unfairly low, that's one thing, but it's just a matter of common sense. You gotta work to earn money. And yes, people go on about how working the floor at MgRonald is hard work for low pay. But it's still a company everybody knows. It has its bad sides, but it treats workers way better than the competition in several aspects."

"It does?"

"I mean, compensation is about more than the number of hours, or the wage on your pay slip. There's also the ease of taking time off. There's insurance. There's a full system for maternity or child-care leave. There's a company that's open and encouraging when you *use* these systems. For working women, having a compliance-driven attitude is extremely important. Generally speaking, the larger in size a company is, the more likely it feels 'easy to work in,' and the easier it is to make long-term life plans with them. There are exceptions, but still. And companies like that tend to not pay bad, either. So if you want to realistically support Marko's dreams, I'd recommend you keep studying with an eye toward scoring a job at one of those firms. But at the same time..."



Kisaki gave Chiho a teasing smile.

“When you’re in school, romance can often come to an end when you enter a new environment. You may just find someone you’re more attracted to.”

“Oh, no *way* I will! Anyone besides Maou to me is...ah...!”

Strung along by Kisaki like that, Chiho could tell how red her face was, even in the darkness of night.

“I know you’re not that type of girl, Chi. I’m more worried that, if Marko starts to fall to rock bottom, you’ll drag yourself along every step of the way.”

“Ah...uh...um...”

The fact she had already declared her unquestioned faithfulness, and the fact Kisaki had so clearly read her feelings for Maou, made Chiho incredibly embarrassed about everything.

“I hope Marko can keep himself together a little more. For *your* future’s sake, too.”

“I, ah, it, it’s not like me, me and Maou are dating...”

“Then all the more. If you’re not a couple, then you diving in *that* much would make anyone worry themselves to death. You need to do something for yourself more, Chi. Otherwise, you won’t be able to do things for other people any longer. You’re still in high school, so there’s not a lot that Marko or the people around you are asking for. But in five or ten years, when you’re grown up, if you want to be someone that people need—and Marko, too—then think seriously about what you need to do, and make a serious effort at it.”

She paused a moment.

“Not to sound pretentious, but if you choose some easy path at random and it leads you to my company or restaurant, I’m sure I wouldn’t hire you. That wouldn’t help you, and it wouldn’t help Marko, either.”

“...!”

Chiho gasped. Here was the other of the two things she and Rika had decided she needed to confirm during their talk: Would it be possible to join Kisaki’s

firm in the future?

“Some things, you’ll lose sight of them if you’re too close. You won’t be able to work with those things any longer. So think about ways you can support him, and approach him with those. Otherwise, you’ll take both him and yourself down.”

They were now in front of Sasazuka Station. Chiho’s head hung low as Kisaki smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s all right. You may feel lost, but you know how to make an effort. I’m sure that’s going to help you later on. Beyond that, if Marko winds up on the streets, I can help him with that, so try not to worry too much about him for now, all right?”

“...All right.”

Kisaki couldn’t be reading her mind. But somewhere within her skull, she had been nurturing the vague, baseless notion that going to Kisaki’s restaurant would let her work with Maou. And that was why Kisaki had refused to allow that idea to take shape—because she truly cared for them both.

“Don’t worry. Grown-ups who can take responsibility for themselves kind of naturally become attractive. Unique. If you work as hard as you can, I’m sure even that dimwit will realize what a wonderful girl you are. He’ll do anything to keep from losing you.”

“I—that—that—I’m nothing like...”

Chiho was now battered by innumerable types of shame all at once, all showing themselves on her intensely reddened face and the mouth she covered with one hand. Having Kisaki bring up Maou made this discussion feel so childish, not to mention a rehash of previous talks. It was beyond embarrassing—almost pathetic.

“You know, I kind of envy you. You’re so young, and you’ve already got all these wonderful experiences to agonize over.”

“...Huh?”

“Ah, never mind. I can’t keep you too much longer. Since we’re here and all,

why don't I accompany you home?"

"Huh? Oh, no, I couldn't..."

"Well, I'm already here anyway. Maybe while we're on the train, you can tell me what you like about Marko so much."

"Huhh?!"

The word *huh* had taken up much of her vocabulary as of late. She could feel herself being slowly cornered.

"He's not a bad guy, of course. He works hard, he's dreaming big, and he's a pretty good looker, too. But if you're asking me whether he has that something that'd make a girl like you so dedicated... I don't know."

"M-M-Ms. Kisaki?!"

"I've never had great luck with men, not that I've ever tried. But I hear from people my age that're marrying and having children, so to an amateur like me... How to put it? I just wanna know what it is about him that makes your heart skip a beat."

"Wh-what are you *saying*?!"

"What was that initial spark? He was your trainer, wasn't he?"

"*Please*, let's talk about something else!"

"Wait, wait! I'm sorry!"

Waiting for the moment the light turned green, Chiho ran across the street, Kisaki chasing after her with a grin on her face. She did feel a little bad about picking on a child that much, but she also felt just a tad envious of her straight-minded disposition as she ran straight on. It was a relief when she finally caught her and took her back home to safety.



"Everything all right?"

"Yusa..."

Iwaki was behind the café counter, looking a little lost.

"What's up? Something going on downstairs? Did we have a café customer?"

“No, um...”

She had followed Iwaki up the stairs, but didn't have any concrete plan after that. Iwaki looked preoccupied with something, so Emi was curious. But as she fished around for something else to say, Iwaki spoke up first.

“I'm sorry. I really shouldn't be doing something like this, but...”

“What's wrong...?”

“I'm no good as a manager at all, if people are finding out how intimidated I am.” Iwaki smiled weakly, then turned her face down, resigned to her fate.

“I'm just a part-timer so I wouldn't know, but...is it the pressure?”

“Honestly, this is like no other location I've been at. I knew the numbers in advance, but now that I'm actually here, it's like I'm *part* of it, I guess. I can tell how smoothly this location runs with Ms. Kisaki in the center of it, and now, well, no wonder we produce the numbers we do.”

Iwaki looked around the empty café space.

“But no matter how much I try, people are gonna know that I can't do it.”

Emi wasn't irresponsible enough to say something pat like, “That's not true.” People change, and with that, their environments. If that change is to the manager, one of the backbones of a business, you'll never create the same atmosphere even if you ape every movement, every command. Every human on Planet Earth was different, so if people changed, so too did the things they left behind them.

“But the biggest surprise is you guys on the crew.”

“Us?”

“Yes. You're all grown up. Not in terms of age, but in how I can reason with all of you. It makes me wonder how she assembled a team full of grown-ups like you. Sasaki's the biggest example of that.”

“Yeah, everybody thinks Chiho is amazing.”

Emi knew Chiho personally, so this was obvious to her, but even an older woman who'd just barely met her could see how far beyond your typical high

schooler she was, apparently.

“Having a teenager as one of the main performers on her shift is impressive enough, but she’s even more polite than most adults, and she’s so capable in all her work. It’s really a miracle. The *last* location I worked at was so awful.”

“The last location...?”

“I was in another large one in a busy area like this one, but we had near-constant turnover and the clientele was just out of their minds. Anyone who works in the restaurant business deals with it sooner or later, but sometimes we’d have staff who’d stop coming to work after having to handle one customer from hell or the other.”

Emi heard that a lot at her previous job, manning the phones at the Dokodemo call center. She had to deal with more than a few monsters herself. But Iwaki didn’t seem to be talking about your run-of-the-mill issues.

“It’s just that, some of the people we hired, they’d disappear for the most nonsensical reasons. They didn’t make any big mistakes, they didn’t have any bad customer experiences—no obvious issue at all. It makes you wonder why they bothered submitting an application.”

“What kind of things did they do?” Emi asked out of curiosity, Chiho being the only teen she knew.

“One guy,” Iwaki replied, her eyes gazing off into the distance, “didn’t show up for his shift. I called him, and he said he can’t make it because he’s at Narita Airport, about to take off for his study abroad.”

“Huh?”

“It wasn’t even a week after we hired him.”

“Wha...? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It didn’t to me, either. And that was the last I ever heard from him—he didn’t even return his uniform. You don’t sign on for study abroad *that* quickly, right? I mean, I’m sure he just disliked the work and made up an excuse, but...”

Even Emi had to smile. That example went far beyond anything she had imagined.

“There was another girl who quit because she said she couldn’t stand touching customers’ hands. She thought it was gross when she was handling cash or giving people trays.”

“Oh...?”

“Yeah, that was my response, too. And she volunteered for front-facing work when she applied, too. I’m not asking her to shake their hands, but you’ll make casual contact with customers a million times a day. I sometimes wonder what happens if someone touches her while she’s grocery shopping.”

“That’s...impressive.”

“Of course, it’s not just high schoolers. Some of the adults I’ve dealt with were really out there, too. Like the college student who ditched her shift for a beauty salon appointment, or the guy in his forties who got fired for stealing a case of buns because he wanted to ‘eat them at home.’”

Not even in the form of rumors had Emi heard of anything as outlandish as that at the Hatagaya Station location. Since Kisaki had been appointed manager, at least, she’d never heard of crewmembers quitting for anything besides unavoidable reasons, like family issues or moving out of town.

“I was the assistant manager at my last location, so I had to interview applicants, but if the people you hire leave for ridiculous reasons like that, it gets to you, you know? But here...”

Iwaki’s eyes fixated on her feet.

“The crew’s so naturally serious-minded. They always do their job. They don’t cut corners when they think nobody’s looking. This environment is like a dream to me. And what I’m worried the most about is destroying it.”

Perhaps, through the floor, she was mentally looking at her team below, diligently performing their duties.

“Oh, no... You don’t need to think that much about it.”

“No. I mean, this is *magic* coming from Ms. Kisaki. It doesn’t matter who it is —me, or anyone else; it’d still get messed up. I’d appreciate if you didn’t tell anyone about this, but when I heard Ms. Kisaki was joining the Consumer

Insight Team, everyone called the post at Hatagaya she was leaving the ‘booby prize.’”

“The booby prize?”

“It seems like the best environment you could ask for, but nobody besides her could ever keep it going.”

The phrase fit perfectly, Emi couldn’t help thinking. But if she said that, Iwaki might interpret it badly.

Despite that, getting all that out of her system seemed to give Iwaki a measure of relief. “I’m sorry. You’re still busy getting used to things around here, and here’s your new manager griping at you.”

“No, not at all...”

“I have responsibilities of my own, so I’ll try to make this into my own MgRonald, as much as I can... But thanks. I’ll make up for this sometime.”

She burst into a smile just as a customer climbed the stairs to the café space.

“Good evening! I’ll take care of this, Yusa, so can you head back down?”

“Oh, sure. Talk to you later...”

Emi turned around, a little concerned, but Iwaki was already deftly handling the café order. For now, she had done what she’d set out to do. At least Iwaki didn’t exhibit the look of despair Emi had picked up from her at first.

Heading back downstairs, Emi spotted Akiko’s and Kawata’s eyes on her. She nodded at them, and they went back to work, looking visibly relieved. They must’ve been concerned about Iwaki as well.

“I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Yes, being Kisaki’s successor was a higher-pressure gig than Emi could’ve ever pictured. But she was right. Everyone on staff here was a grown-up. As long as Iwaki didn’t maliciously cross them, she had all of their respect and support. And as time passed, Emi was sure Iwaki would settle down and get comfortable in her post.

“Being her successor, huh...?” she mumbled.

“Being what?”

Maou, swinging in from out of nowhere, caught her whispering to herself. Emi turned, not particularly surprised. He had his helmet and delivery bag on his side, presumably back from another run.

“Hello. And never mind. I had a long chat with Ms. Iwaki.”

“Oh? Is she upstairs now?”

“Yeah, a customer just showed up.”

“Ah. Well, I’ll get changed and head up. Chi already left?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t join her on the way home, but Ms. Kisasi said she’d join her instead.”

“Oh, all right. That oughta be fine.” Maou nodded as he put away the bag.

“...Hey.”

“Hmm?”

“Just theoretically speaking...”

“Uh-huh?”

“If I had killed you back then, what do you think would’ve happened to the world?”

“Huh? Where’d *that* come from? Did you have to bring it up right now? It’s not like I can give you a quick one-sentence answer.”

“...Right. I’m sorry.”

The question, now that Emi heard it for herself, did sound a little crazy. She regretted it.

“But I’m just wondering. Like, if you weren’t around, what would’ve happened to your realm, and your army?”

“What would’ve happened? That’s easy,” Maou casually replied, checking to be sure Akiko and Kawata weren’t nearby. “Ashiya and Camio would’ve made everything work out. Always have, always will.”

“...Even now?”

“We’ve already anticipated the worst-case scenario and taken measures for it. So quit worrying. We ain’t gonna cause more trouble for you humans than you already got.”

“Uh... What do you mean...?”

“We’re still on the clock. I’ll tell you next time I have a chance. Ente Isla’s important to me, too, now. And Japan.”

And so Maou returned upstairs, leaving the nonplussed Emi behind. Iwaki was behind the counter up there, comparing the café inventory with the ordering app on her tablet.

“That’s why I better support Iwaki, too,” Maou muttered to himself, waving at her to indicate his presence. “She’s the main driver of Hatagaya Station from now on.”

He needed to offer his full backup to the woman who’d be his new boss shortly, in name and deed. The location was in the midst of a personnel transfer, something that happened to every company in every nation on the planet—and Maou was sure this event would help provide a future for all the many lives lived out within the demon realms. For now, Ashiya was laying down all the groundwork for him...but over here, Hatagaya was facing a potential staff shortage that was nothing short of desperate.

“Three months to go. Given how things are over there, I better start seriously thinking about this.”

He was seriously thinking that he had to start taking action. Action that was possible within his everyday Japanese life. It may not seem like he was capable of anything, but still he needed to reach out for his future.

“But first things first. I gotta pay the repair bill on my apartment.”



For the upcoming clash against heaven, Maou and his team actually didn’t need to know much more than they already did. But their encounter underneath the demon realms had taught them that when it came to those last few question marks, they knew well near nothing. That was why Maou had to take Emi and Chiho to the Shiba residence. Paying for Room 201’s repairs was a

secondary affair—they needed to take another step toward the truth behind the Sephirah.

So the day after assorted tales began to unfold at the Hatagaya Station McDonald, Maou forced his quivering legs to take him up to the doorbell of Miki Shiba's residence.

After a few anxious moments...

"All right. Yes, yes, the whole payment's here. And, ah, this is all well and good, but if you don't mind my saying so, I like to think of myself as an understanding landlord. So the next time something happens, if you could tell me as soon as possible, that would be *greatly* appreciated."

"...Certainly. I'm deeply sorry about this."

Maou was frozen in place at the Shiba living room, head hung deeply down. Next to him was Emi, who accepted Shiba's receipt, watching Maou break into a cold sweat out the corner of her eye, and next to her was Chiho, worriedly watching the proceedings.

Landlords were always difficult creatures to gauge the disposition of when you dealt with them, but within the force field of the Shiba residence, Maou was like a canary in a cage. He was legitimately concerned that, at some unforeseen point, the house itself would literally swallow him up. How could Acieth, Erone, and Gabriel be so content, so unaffected living here? And Emi and Chiho didn't seem particularly terrified of her presence, either—why did she strike mortal fear in the hearts of Maou and the other demons? No matter how often he asked himself, he couldn't find an answer. It was asking someone with claustrophobia, or a fear of heights or needles, why they felt that way. He had an illogical, impossible-to-explain fear of the landlord, and so did Ashiya, Urushihara, and Camio. That was the only way to put it.

"So I understand you wished to discuss other matters today as well?"

Shiba looked at Maou, Emi, then Chiho in order.

"What would be so important to ask that you've put Alas Ramus, Acieth, and Erone in Amane's care for now?"

"Ms. Shiba..." Maou drummed up all the courage he could. "What is 'latent

force’?”

This was what Maou and his friends needed to know the most about, when it came to their relationship with the heavens.

He had the vague idea that it was a force united across the people that inhabited a world visited upon by a Tree of Sephirot, and the Sephirah children that resulted from it. But there seemed to be no consistency to it. Chiho, from Earth, had no problem harnessing a Yesod fragment from Ente Isla; Emi could manifest the fragment inside her into battle gear; but then there was Erone, who was wholly independent and not fused with anyone. Maou just happened to unite with Acieth; Emi just happened to unite with Alas Ramus—but otherwise, they couldn’t really describe these jewels as anything but “things with great unknown powers.”

More to the point, the only cases of Sephirah and people merging together they knew of were Alas Ramus and Acieth. It wasn’t even clear whether that behavior was uniform among all the Sephirah. If that *were* the case, however, it greatly reduced Maou’s chances at victory. It meant, after all, that the Sephirah apart from Yesod and Gevurah could be merged with the fighting powers of the angels. If what Acieth told Maou before could be trusted, *she* couldn’t fuse with an angel, but did that apply to the other Sephirah? They didn’t know.

But Erone *did* side with the angels on the Eastern Island. Acieth stated that his merging with an angel would be unthinkable, but if you recall the “episode” he had inside the Shinjuku subway line earlier, there was a nonzero chance that a Sephirah child could bend their principles and do the deed anyway.

Of course, neither Maou nor Emi had ever succeeded at forcing Acieth or Alas Ramus into granting them their powers. Acieth’s capricious tapping into her force had caused headaches (and worse) for Maou many times. Even Alas Ramus had dulled the power of Emi’s blade before.

“The children of Sephirah,” he said, “refer to the people they fuse with as their ‘latent forces.’ But if you look at it, aren’t *they* the more powerful force that’s grafting themselves onto us? Because I think the relationship is pretty one-sided between me and Acieth.”

Even in regular life, Maou added to himself.

“But she still goes on about how I’m the latent force for the Sephirah. What does she mean? And what do Sephirah latch on to people like me for?” he asked.

“What for? Is that all you wanted to ask me?”

“Huh?”

“I can certainly give you the answer to that. I can, but I *do* think that’s ever so slightly different from the information you seek.”

Maou, unable to grasp the meaning of this, just sat there. But Shiba, not going into any further depth, gave him a light nod.

“The ultimate purpose of the ‘latent force’ system, like I briefly touched upon before, is to ensure the prosperity of the species that it chooses. But there is another, more fundamental reason behind it. A very simple one, in fact. Mr. Maou, in your eyes, what do I look like?”

“Um?”

Maou was at a loss for an answer. Which is to say, he *knew* the answer, but as he came to realize, he never *really* thought the landlord was human at all.

“You look like...a human being, right?”

He felt like he was being deliberately goaded into the wrong reply. Hopefully Shiba understood his hesitation to indicate that he didn’t understand the meaning behind the question.

“Ah, very good. If I *didn’t* look like a person, I wasn’t sure what I would do.”

Was this meant as a joke? Maou had no way of telling. But Shiba gave a warm, bewitching smile, before turning next to Chiho.

“Ms. Sasaki, have you taken any biology classes in school?”

“Biology? Yes.”

“It’s said that the form, nature, and behavior of all creatures, humans included, is geared toward three general goals. Can you name those goals?”

Maou and Emi turned to each other. Shiba, noticing this, spoke up again.

“And I *think* the same would apply to demons and angels, yes.”

With that, her gaze returned to Chiho, who thought about it for a few moments.

“Um, I think it’s...predation, self-defense, and reproduction, right?”

“Well done,” Shiba said, grinning.

Predation is the intake of other organic manner to preserve your own life. Self-defense is protection from stresses stemming from internal and external threats. Reproduction is the passing on of your genes to the next generation. These form the instincts of self-preservation, etched into all living things.

“And the Sephirah, and the Tree of Sephirot, are all living creatures,” Shiba continued.

“Living...?” Maou said.

“We can leave offspring for the future like anyone else. Amane’s father was my older brother, the one you know as Binah—but my parent, the Tree of Sephirot, engages in behavior of its own to produce offspring. When the Sephirah children help mankind grow prosperous and firmly rooted to their world, the tree sets off—to a new planet, in search of the next species.”

Emi cut in. “So Sephirot and its Sephirah select humanoid species to ensure their own survival?” There was a sharpness to her voice. This was the selection of very lives she was talking about.

“That’s exactly correct,” Shiba said with a nod, as if it were nothing notable. “Does that disturb you, Ms. Yusa, the fact that we select the seeds of mankind as if we were gods? Or that the ones we *don’t* select are doomed to fail?”

“.....”

“I think that anger stems from the arrogance of the seeds we call people. Besides, it is not like we latch on to the strongest of seeds in order to live. There are cases where we’ve merged species with each other; it is rare for the genes of a species to be completely done away with. But that doesn’t change the fact that a Sephirot and its Sephirah are still part of the great, eternal cycle of life.”

Maou felt that one of the doubts in his mind was now clear, albeit not in the way he had imagined.

Previously, Rika had asked why the Sephirot and Sephirah went about choosing human “seeds” like this. The Sephirah, despite all the strength they wielded, still merged with human hosts because it simply let them create a world easy for them to live in. Once the Tree of Sephirot saw this process unfold, it would then seek a new world, a new place that’d be comfortable and healthy enough for its new batch of Sephirah.

“But...again, wouldn’t that make *them* the ‘latent force’ here?”

“It is just a different way of thinking about it. Many species, when faced with mortal danger, borrow our powers in one way or the other. That has been true of Earth in the past as well. From our perspective, it comes down to who takes leadership, in terms of survival of the species. It is a matter of subjective opinion.”

In other words, it depended on how you looked at it. And to the Sephirah, it must have felt more like “Hey, here’s power for you,” a power which had saved Emi’s and Maou’s hides more than once. Either way, it was just how both sides saw the relationship—and the term *latent force* didn’t have any especially deep meaning to it after all.

Which brought the topic back to Shiba’s initial question. Shiba was a fully matured Sephirah—what was the “even more important thing” that someone needed to ask her? After a few silent seconds, it was Chiho who spoke up first.

“Speaking of this ‘latent force’ relationship... Meaning, the way Sephirah can fuse with people like Yusa... Is there a way someone can tear a Sephirah away from a person?”

“Oh, yes.”

The three of them were shocked. Such a casual way to describe it.

“Um, can *anyone* do that?”

“I believe I’ve told you before about that. There are three ways to end a latent-force relationship. One is to have the fused person pass away. Another is for the Sephirah to willfully end it. And the third is the so-called final option.”

Laila had discussed that right after she had revealed herself to Maou, back in Urushihara’s hospital room. But she never did reveal what the “final option”

was.

“I hasten to add that the ‘final option’ is not something that requires great sacrifice to engineer or the like. It is simply rather difficult to set up the right situation, and the decision is rarely made to go through with it anyway...hence why we call it the *final* option. The phenomenon itself is quite simple. I’ve done it once myself in front of you, Mr. Maou.”

“““Huh?”””

In other words, Acieth had been separated from Maou before? And it was that easy to pull off? That alone was enough to plunge Maou and Emi into confusion.

“Really, it could hardly be easier. All that has to happen is, a Sephirah touches another one and uses its will to separate it away.”

“Ah, hello there, Emilia—*whoahh?!*”

“Where is Mother?!”

The door to Room 101 was all but kicked off its hinges as Emi confronted Nord.

“Uh...?! She hasn’t come back since leaving for her place in Nerima three days ago. I haven’t heard from her today at all...”

“*You haven’t heard from her?!?*”

“N-no. I don’t know why, but she’s not picking up her phone. She does send me texts every now and then, but...”

“H-hey! Hey, Emi, calm down already! Things are fine over here for now...”

“How do we know that?! There’s no guarantee Ms. Shiba or Amane will cover for that, and I need to talk to Mother anyway, so I’m going over there!”

“Ah... Hey! Emi!!”

“Yusa!!”

Maou’s and Nord’s pleas fell on deaf ears as Emi stormed outside and flew straight into the air. “Don’t worry! I’ll be back before my shift begins!” she shouted before she soared away.

“Don’t let...anyone see you up there...”

Maou shrugged. At this rate, Alas Ramus would likely be fused back inside her within a minute’s time.

“That impulsiveness certainly reminds you of her mother, doesn’t it?”

“I think she’d be livid if she heard that.”

“You’re one to talk,” Maou said, grinning at Nord after he wandered outside to join them.

“Did something happen?”

“A *few* things, yes. I’ll leave Laila to her, but are Erone and Acieth back yet?”

“No... Is it bad?”

“Maaaaaybe. It’s probably something we should’ve anticipated, somewhere along the line.”

Maou sounded unaffected, but his eyes weren’t smiling. Neither was Chiho’s weighed-down face.

“It seems our ‘enemy’ is not *only* the angels.”



The intercom button for Room 306 at the Royal Lily Garden Toyotama apartment building was in danger of being permanently smushed against the wall, judging by how fast and forcefully Emi was jabbing at it. The conclusion derived from Shiba’s words completely upturned Laila and Gabriel’s understanding of matters. And Laila—Emi’s mother, but more importantly, the key ringleader in this struggle against heaven—could no longer be allowed to stay untracked.

“What...are you *doing*...?!”

Emi glanced at her hand, then the doorknob—then recalled that Ms. Shiba owned Royal Lily Garden as well. Bashing down the door wasn’t quite the best option yet.

“From outside...!”

Without hesitation, keeping an eye out for potential witnesses, Emi leaped off

the outside corridor and floated up along the wall to reach the balcony to Laila's apartment. The window was blocked by a thin lace curtain, but she could still faintly see inside.

Squinting to get a closer view, Emi suddenly gasped.

".....!!"

Someone was on the floor. Several seconds passed. No motion.

"Mo...!"

Emi almost shouted out before finally realizing that the balcony door was unlocked.

"Mother?!"

She opened it and flew inside. And she was right—it was Laila on the floor.

"Good, you're alive..."

Up close, Emi could tell she was breathing. Her clothing oddly had sand all over it, her hair all unkempt and greasy, but she let out a groan when Emi propped her up. It seemed she wasn't unconscious so much as in a deep sleep. The sudden change of position made Laila cough a couple of times as she opened her eyes.

"Ah, Emilia... What's going on?"

"What's going *on*?! Father said you aren't calling him, so I come to visit, and you won't answer the door, and then I see you lying here through the window, and...!"

And I was worried, she caught herself almost saying. She thought the ill will between them was all but gone by now, but still she hesitated to expose her true feelings at times like these. Whether Laila was aware of that or not, she slowly got up, giving her daughter a light smile.

"I'm sorry... I've been pretty busy the past three days."

"Oh? Busy at your hospital job?"

"That, too, but more putting my own affairs in order, I suppose."

"What do you mean?"

That sounded alarming to Emi, and it made her pulse quicken. But between the rings under her eyes, illuminated by the sunlight through the window, and the strange sense of pride as she spread her arms wide, her actions weren't matching her words.

"Well, Emilia? Notice anything new?"

"What?"

Emi, confused, took her eyes off her defiantly smiling mother and looked around the room. She had been here before. It was just a typical apartment room, with a computer desk to one side...

".....!"

Then Emi finally realized: She and Laila were standing on the floor. Looking around, there were walls, furniture, doors—the usual.

"I don't think I've worked *this* hard in the past ten years *oww!*"

For the first time in a while, Emi slapped her mother on the cheek.

"What was *that* forrrr?!"

"Mother, do you have *any idea* what kind of predicament we're in...?"

"Of course I do! That's why I got rid of all the stuff I didn't need! Do you have any idea of the state of Satan's room?! And what happened to it next?!"

"I was the first one to find out!!"

Laila's room was a demonic realm in and of itself. After Emi's visit to the proper demon realms, that was almost understating it. Things were everywhere, in disorganized heaps, never getting disposed of...a complete mess. This, even after the entire Justina family pitched in to clean up, rendering it at least hospitable for human residence.

"So you haven't talked to Father the past three days because you were cleaning your apartment?! After all that cleaning we did?! How could you let it fall back into *this* again?!"

"That's why I'm breaking my own heart to make sure this never happens again! I'm decluttering, all right?!"

“What does an angel know about decluttering?!”

“Amane contacted me... She said Ms. Shiba forcibly renovated his place. She said he had to pay her for it.”

“He sure did!”

The fact Emi literally just got back from covering that repair fee for him only made her angrier.

“So Amane said the landlord might check up on *my* place, too, and I kind of panicked.”

Unlike Maou, Laila had not physically damaged her apartment. But if her place was back to the way it used to be, the landlord wasn't likely to take that lightly.

“...Well, I'm glad you're taking up valuable time with *this* right now, when we've got Church knights breathing down our necks and Ignora to fight before long.”

“I—I don't need you telling me that, all right? *You're* still working at MgRonald in the midst of this, aren't you? It's the same thing. There's nothing we have to hurry with right now, so I'm just trying to firm up my position!”

“Stop sounding like the Devil King...”

Right. Yes. Put it like *that*, and Emi didn't have much of a leg to stand on.

“Anyway, I found out something pretty bad. Can you take a shower and come back to Sasazuka for me?”

“Something bad? Like what?”

“Bad enough to affect the core of our strategy. We already have the astronaut to deal with...”

Emi finally regained her composure enough to reveal the truth.

“...But we *may* have to fight all the children of Sephirah.”

**THE
DEVIL
KING'S
ARMY
FIGHTS
ON**



THE DEVIL KING'S ARMY FIGHTS ON

Maou stood in the middle of Room 201 of Villa Rosa Sasazuka. Erone was next to him, with Amane, Laila, Emi, and Urushihara each taking a corner. Chiho and Nord were in the corridor outside, peeking in through the kitchen window. Kinanna was snoozing as usual in his cage in one of the corners, and Camio, his feathers having regained a healthy sheen, was nervously perched on top of it.

“Okay, here we go.”

Erone touched Maou’s right hand.

“Acieth, come out.”

“Kay.”

“*That* easy?!”

As Chiho shouted through the window, yes, it was *that* easy. It was all it took to separate Maou from Acieth, easier than digging a carrot or potato out of the garden.

“You feel any different?”

Maou shrugged at Urushihara. “Not really, no.”

“What about you, Acieth?”

“Me, all is well. But I have hunger.”

Everyone ignored the latter half of her statement.

“Mmmh...! You ignore me, I pluck Camio and fry up!”

“Gah! Enough of this! Stop *peeeep* at once!”

“Acieth, don’t start a racket over there. You’ll wake up Kinanna.”

Between the chicken and the lizard, it was like a nature documentary in that corner of the room. Maou took a moment to smooth things over before

surveying the room again.

“Well, you all saw that. That’s gonna be a problem.”

“So are you saying the person in that space suit wasn’t Ignora?”

“Well, nobody saw the face. Laila thought it was Ignora, but...”

“...Right. Just... You know, the atmosphere, and her body language. We’ve been separate for so long that I can’t be sure, but the voice sounded pretty similar, too.”

“Can you hear someone’s voice if they’re in a space suit?”

“I...I don’t know.”

Suddenly, the identity of this other-world astronaut didn’t seem like nearly the open-and-shut case it once was. Only Laila and Gabriel personally knew Ignora, which didn’t help matters. Urushihara said his memory was so murky that he couldn’t identify her face or voice with confidence, and Laila, by the sound of it, wasn’t much better off.

“B-but this is an emergency!” Chiho exclaimed. “Shouldn’t we let Ashiya and Suzuno know as soon as possible?”

She had a good point, but Emi scowled at the idea.

“If we can, I’d like to wait for them to contact us. Alciel and Rika have already been attacked by the Eight Great Scarves knights here in Japan once. I have no idea who’s watching the Central Continent right now, or how. Until we get word from Eme or Bell, I think we should avoid any interaction, no matter how short.”

“Yes, I know I said it’d be carefully guarded, but if *this* is how things are...”

“I’m putting my vote in with Chiho Sasaki. If the guys we’re trying to protect might turn into our enemies soon, I think it’s worth risking the danger to let them know, dude.”

“I can see the logic to that, but we can’t. Maybe we don’t mind if *we’re* exposed to danger, but think about the Eight Great Scarves, and the knights from the Western Island under Rumack and Eme and Bell’s command. We’re gonna have to tread cautiously.”

Emi couldn't deny Urushihara's point, but she still shook her head at it. The area around Devil's Castle on the Central Continent was secure thanks in no small part to Hazel Rumack and the Azure Emperor. Before they stepped up, there was talk of the Federated Order of the Five Continents stepping in, dismantling Devil's Castle, and rebuilding Isla Centurum. Instead, Maou's team had enough time to round up the surviving demons, repair the castle, and launch it when the time was right—and that was thanks to the Emperor, Rumack, and all the knights sent to the area. If the Church knew about them, it was bound to become an international crisis, one that could lead to conflict not just between them, but between other human nations. That was the danger Emi warned of.

"Well, personally, I'd say sowing more chaos like that would actually be good for us. It'd stop the Church knights in their tracks, y'know? But I guess that wouldn't work for you guys. Like, the artifact search was going really well, and now we're looking at a likely defeat, huh?"

"And with Kinanna in this *peep* state of affairs..."

Urushihara and Camio made the air seem heavier than ever.

"But... Well, what do you think, Acieth? The person in the astronaut suit... Did it seem familiar to you at all?"

"I dunno."

"You dunno?" Laila asked, exasperated. "You flew into a rage and beat the crap out of 'em."

Acieth shrugged. "At the time, the space suit, I did not think I was knowing him, no."

"But looking at Erone right now, and judging how the space suit plucked Alas Ramus out of me just like that, I'm more convinced that was a Sephirah child now, not an angel."

"Yeah, but what's their motivation for attacking us, then? If the Sephirah are runnin' around all over the place, they don't even *need* rescuing."

"What? That, it is not what we were saying before! We are going to go and rescue the all of them, no?!"

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Supposedly you and Alas Ramus’s friends are being held and forced to do the angels’ bidding. That’s why we’re tryin’ to save them, right? And now not only are they going around perfectly free, they’re actively hostile against us. That’s *totally* not what I signed up for.”

“But maybe it was the accident! They do not know true situation, so they try to rescue me and big sister!”

“They weren’t, Acieth. That astronaut recognized me as Laila. They were ready to fight me from the beginning.”

“Besides, if that were true, that means you beat one of your siblings to a pulp for no reason, Acieth.”

“Oh...”

This was apparently the first time that dawned on her. The contradictory thoughts in Acieth’s mind made her grimace.

“Maybe the space suit guy went berserk?” Emi looked at Erone. “Because that was kinda the theme of our battle in the Fukutoshin Line.”

“Was it?” he asked. “I don’t really know myself.”

“That’s all right, Erone,” Maou said to soothe him. “We don’t have much to work with right now, so the more elements we can consider, the better, is all.” He figured Erone still felt a little responsible. “Besides, even if that was a Sephirah gone wild, the question becomes why the angels would let it run around without a chaperone. Maybe Erone escaped their attention during all the Eastern Island stuff, but if they let the other Sephirah go around fighting whoever they wanted, it means the angels can’t control them at all.”

Everyone in the room looked at each other...before they all reached the same conclusion.

“That bastard Gabriel’s still hiding something, isn’t he?”

“Either that, or there’s something even *he’s* unaware of maybe.”

“He was pretty adamant about not knowing the astronaut last time we talked...not that any of us believed him.”

“I read Sariel’s file here, too, and Satan was right. It’s full of weird stuff.”

Chiho looked up at the envelope in Laila's hand. "Oh, that envelope..."

"What's that?" the unaware Nord asked.

"It's a record of assorted things Sariel knows about heaven and the angels," Emi said. "Bell and I heard the same things from him before, but..."

Laila, looking at her daughter, seemed confused. "But according to this, I think Gabriel and I might've terribly misunderstood something. Sariel, too, for that matter."

"Yeah, assuming you're remembering it correctly."

"Hey! Satan!" Laila glared at Maou for that snide remark. "But Sariel's understanding of the history of heaven and the angels is completely different from mine."

"...How do you mean?" her husband asked from outside.

"It's exactly that," Laila replied, distressed. "Like, how he describes Lucifer, and the first-and second-generation angels, and so on."

"Yeah, I don't remember too much about the past, but there *were* a few things in there that struck me as kinda odd. I think we're gonna need to call an angels' conference, dude. Get me and Sariel involved, plus some guards just in case. That's another reason why we need to get in contact with Ente Isla fast."

"Hmm..."

"Dude, it's an emergency," Urushihara said, pressing the ambivalent Emi. "I really think we should contact them, rather than waiting for Bell and everyone to contact us. I know assorted folks may be monitoring them, but there are Idea Links being tossed around all over the world, aren't there? It's only been a week since those old cranks in the Church had those weird dreams, right? It'll be fine!"

"True... Do you think a voice link would be safe?"

"Letting your guard down like that could really be raising the 'death' flag for y'all, you know..."

"Amane, could you stop saying things like that?"

Maou had his complaints about her less-than-elegant jab. But considering that Emeraldal, Rumack, and Suzuno were back in their native lands attending to their own posts, unadvised behavior could put all of them in danger.

“If only we had a contact we could turn to,” Emi wondered out loud.

The group heard a ringtone.

“Oh, sorry, that’s me...” Chiho hurriedly reaching for her phone. “Ah!”

Looking at the screen, she smiled and shouted into the room. “It’s Emeraldal! She’s calling me!!”

“Whoa!”

“Really?!”

It was the exact person they wanted to get on the line right now. Overjoyed, Chiho pushed the Talk button.

“Hello! Emeraldal, it’s Chiho, um.....huh?”

But her expression and voice gradually began to ratchet downward.

“Wh-why?”

They morphed into abject surprise, accompanied by a dark air of foreboding. Chiho nervously gulped, eyes open wide, as she finally managed a reply.

“Why are you on Emeraldal’s phone...?”

The entire room tensed up. But it was actually someone Chiho knew well.

“What... What’s going on over there, Farlo?”

She was hearing the voice of Farfarello, who should’ve been in Devil’s Castle on the Central Continent right now.

“Farfarello... Wait.” Maou came to his feet. “Chi, can I talk to him?”

“Oh, uh, sure. Um, Farlo, Maou—I mean, His Demonic Highness—wants to hear from you, okay?”

Chiho, still bewildered, walked into the apartment with Nord, handing the phone to Maou. Nervously, he accepted the call.

“Farfarello, where are you? North? East? South?”

“What is all this?” This line of questioning unnerved Emi.

“Really? North? Damn. Ashiya musta done pretty well, then. That old biddy’s a more formidable foe than the Azure Emperor, nine times outta ten... Right, yeah.”

Judging by Maou’s side of the chat, while he wasn’t expecting Farfarello to contact him, he did have an idea of what the demon might be up to.

“Okay, so you’ll be able to move around and stay in contact from the North, then? Good job, good job. Sounds like everyone else is getting along well, too.”

“Devil King, what are you...?” Emi began.

He avoided her question for now.

“Well, I was actually hoping for *you* since you know a fair bit about Japan, but being head chieftain and all, that’s not too possible, huh? That’s why I’m kind of in a hurry, you know. Aren’t Libicocco and Ciriatto free right now? ...Oh. Okay.”

And then, at the next moment, what Maou had to say shocked not only Emi, but Urushihara and Chiho as well.

“Right, send Libicocco over here to Japan for me. I’ll have him work at my joint. We’re super short staffed right now.”

“Ah—”

“Huh?”

“Whaaaaaaaaat?!”

It was, of course, Emi who let out the most piercing of shrieks.

“Oh? What is commotion, everyone?”

Only Acieth was left unaware of what all of this meant.



Several days back...

The word *heat* no longer seemed potent enough to describe the landscape.

“The rays of the sun are like needles.”

“This is still cooler than the Fire Road any day. Those lands truly *are* a living

hell.”

Golden yellow sand surrounded them in all directions. Not a cloud was in the sky. In this realm, the two tall men here stood alone.

“How could a nation, of all things, ever be born in a place like this?”

“Well, an oasis city, at least. Humans can’t survive without water, y’know. On the other side of that wall, things are decently comfortable.”

Albert pointed at a long wall ahead, standing tall as it reflected the sand-colored sunlight. Ashiya nodded his acknowledgment.

“I certainly hope they are.”

It was the day before the six-person, three-species breakfast summit with Chiho. This was the Great Olidyma Desert, extending vertically across the Southern Island, and Ashiya and Albert were right in the middle of it. In front of them was a vast wall, a seeming mirage at the end of this expansive waste. This wall marked the border of Vashrahma, a nation home to the most powerful army of warriors on the entire island.

“Ooh! They sure cleaned up the gate in the past two years!” Albert declared. The wall was adorned with a gigantic wooden gate, almost a work of art in itself. “Y’know, when we first came here, the lizards had smashed the gate to splinters.”

“Lizards? You mean the dragonices that live in the Great Olidyma Desert?”

“Oh, you know them, huh?”

“That’s impossible. This looks like quite a sturdy gate to me, but a dragonix is only about this large at best.” Ashiya held his hands out, cradling a large, invisible ball with them.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t believe it, either, until I saw it, but I tell you, nature can be one fierce mother sometimes. Of course, I have *that* to thank for getting to know the warrior chief around here. But let’s go in. We ought to have someone greeting us soon.”



“Right.”

So they began walking toward the wall. Underneath his billowing cape, Ashiya regretted not bringing along the sunscreen lotion Maou had bought on sale a while back, one that barely managed even one star in online reviews. No matter how advanced Japan’s fabric industry was, there was nothing that could withstand sunlight as intense as this within easy reach of him. So Albert procured some traditional desert clothing for them—but Ashiya had far, *far* underestimated how punishing this would be.

“Hey, you all right? You look pale.”

“Mmm... Ah, I am getting along.”

Ashiya and Albert hadn’t walked across this entire desert, either. They had just flown in through a Gate that opened around a mile and a quarter south of Vashrahma. This was based on a commonly accepted international policy that Gates should never be used to invade a country’s borders, but Ashiya assumed a mile or so of marching wouldn’t present any challenge. Yet, the moment they set foot on land, he immediately realized that the sun wasn’t the only heat source around here. The white sand absorbed that sunlight, radiating it, warming up the body two or three times over again. He was wearing the same thin-soled sneakers he always wore in Japan and Devil’s Castle, but now he felt like he was walking barefoot on fire. What’s more, he wasn’t sweating. The temperature on the surface was so high, any sweat coming out of his pores immediately evaporated.

A journey of just over a mile seemed like a grueling odyssey.

“Ah, here we are.”

Albert threw a cloud of sand into the air. Before long, he noticed a man riding in on a camel, a spear-like weapon strapped to his own back.

“Albert Ende! We have been expecting you.”

The masculine-looking desert youth dismounted and came up to Albert, his shiny white teeth visible from under his hood.

“Thank you for coming! Chief Rajid is beside himself waiting for you!”

“And thank *you* for picking me up. Sorry to push this on you so suddenly.”

“Not at all. You are every bit the savior of Vashrahma as Emilia the Hero. Ever since the day you arrived, we swore to the heavens that Vashrahma would always be open to you... Do you remember me, by the way?”

“Hmm?”

The patrolman looked at him, a bit bashful, before removing the object on his back and showing it to Albert. It looked like a spear at first, but now he could tell it was actually a broom with a bamboo handle.

“Ahh! You came to greet us last time as well...!”

“I did. Afterwards, I was rewarded with an honorary warrior’s title. This time, I have been ordered to serve as a guide and bodyguard for the two of you. You can call me Garni Vidou.”

He bowed to them a bit.

When Albert had first come to Vashrahma, the nation was facing an existential threat. It was spawning season for the species Ashiya called “dragonix,” and a gigantic horde of them had been migrating across the desert. Hundreds of thousands could be in one herd, their movements evoking tales of the legendary dragons of ancient times. That particular year saw unprecedented numbers of dragonices, and Vashrahma was right in the middle of them. The result was a thoroughly thrashed gate and wall—and if the dragonices decided to strike again on the return trip, the nation itself could very well have been toppled.

Witnessing this, Albert and his band had kicked things off by capturing the lizards stranded in Vashrahma and its surroundings, then holding a nationwide barbecue with their carcasses. The dragonices, keenly sensitive to threats to their kin, thus imprinted on the idea that the main city was a Danger Zone, avoiding it for the return migration and saving the nation. Garni would later guide them to the way out of the Fire Road, even fighting against the Malebranche force that had invaded the Southern Island for a little bit.

“Ah, I see, I see. You’ve made a name for yourself, eh?”

The reunion was a warm one for Albert, but considering you could already fry

an egg on any available surface around here, they didn't want to get any warmer.

"...I must apologize but," Ashiya said, jabbing at Albert with a scratchy voice, "can we save this for later?"

"Oh, my apologies. This guy here's not too used to the desert, so we'd better get over to...whoa, hey!"

"...Mmfh." But then Ashiya's eyesight began to fade out on him.

"Oh, don't tell me you're..."

And before he could hear what Albert had to say, all was dark.

The first thing Ashiya saw when he awoke was the canopy of the black oaken bed he was resting on.

Forcing his creaky joints to move, he got up and realized he was inside a room now. A soft breeze flowed in from an open window, blowing the canopy's lace curtains around a little. Beyond them, he could see a pitcher of water. It immediately reminded Ashiya of his intense thirst. He leaped out of bed and took it up.

"Nngh... Ugh."

It was more lukewarm than cold, but it still slaked his aching throat.

After drinking about half the jug, he finally had the strength to examine his surroundings. A town was visible out the window, and he was in an unusually large space, with tiled floors and a stone ceiling lined with intricate sculptures. Between the bed, the jug, and the other furniture, he could tell he was in an upper-class estate.

"...Where am I?"

"Oh, you're awake?"

From out of sight, a voice rang out. He turned to it and found Albert with a large man, even larger than him.

"Oh... Did heatstroke take me?"

"Ha-ha-ha! I was hardly expecting one of the Great Demon Generals to get

overheated in the desert! If *you* came down South, maybe we would've had an easier time of that war, eh?"

The man was one head taller than Albert, his arms a measure thicker. His skin was darker than Albert's as well, and he had a large and well-grown mustache.

"Welcome, demon. I am Rajid Rahs Rian, leader of this land."

It was Chief Rajid himself, chief of Vashrahma, nation of warriors. He should have been already past fifty years old, but the power his body exuded would make him easily pass for thirty. Ashiya nodded to him, steadying his legs enough to stand up.

"And I am the Great Demon General Alciel. It is with great regret that I must show you my current sorry state, Chief Rajid."

"Oh, there's no need to worry. Beyond this door, there are sentries more powerful than even Albert, the strongest men of the Southern Island, all instructed to kill you should the need arise—but no matter their pride as the strongest of the land, every one of them is deathly afraid of you. No, you are not the only sorry one here."

The giant man, as gregarious a person as ever existed, stepped toward Alciel.

"You look the very picture of a human."

"I *am* a human, right now. I am deliberately not absorbing any demonic force to avoid taking the form of one. If your powerful warriors decided to attack me, my life would be over in seconds."

"Oh, would it? Albert tells me of urgent business we need to discuss, but what would *you*, one of the generals who struck terror in the hearts of people worldwide not long ago, wish to talk about with *me*?"

Ashiya looked straight into the obsidian eyes of Rajid. "About the future of 'people,' and the future of this land."

The chief, for his part, made no secret of the fact he was scrutinizing every word Ashiya had just said. His lips curled into a grin.

"So demons speak of the future, then?"

"Demons are as alive as you are."

Until now, few humans would have imagined that: that as strong and fearsome as they were, they were still living, thinking things, considering their own futures.

“Albert, how long can you stay in this country?”

“Well, if you conclude that Alciel is harmless, I’d like to take my leave right this moment, in fact.”

“Heh-heh-heh... I see. In that case, can you stay until morning for me? I wish to ask you about a few things as well. There is nothing but sand, sky, and wind around us. The sand will muffle any of the more...extreme topics we might discuss.”

With that, Rajid lightly tapped Ashiya’s shoulder with one of his massive fists.

“You still look pale. I will have some fruit sent over that will help with your heatstroke. We can speak tonight.”

“...I am obliged to your kindness.”

“And once you recover, you may walk anywhere you like within our borders, as long as Albert is with you. It is not a large place, but I am sure a Great Demon General will soon see why this is one of the most vital points on the Southern Island.”

Two or so hours later, when his strength finally returned to him, Ashiya joined Albert and Garni on a walk through the town of Vashrahma.

This was a planned city, one whose sections were laid out down to the last block. The warrior chief’s fortress was the building closest to the oasis spring; from it, row-home-like houses of sun-dried brick gathered around a well that tapped into the underground water source. The northern part of the city was home to vast irrigated fields, a completely unexpected sight in the desert, laden with melon-like fruits similar to the watermelon sent to Ashiya’s room.

“Are those melons purely for food consumption?” the demon asked.

Garni shook his head. “The fruit itself provides valuable water for us, but you can also burn the rind and mix the ashes with a little water to create a decent surfactant.”

“Ah. So detergent, then?”

“Yes, but not exactly like the soap they have in the East and the West. Vashrahma has a large and bountiful oasis, but water is still carefully rationed out to every resident. Thus we do not launder our clothes so much as rub the dirt out of them.”

In addition to using the ashes alone, one could also dry the rinds in the sun, add a little water, work in ashes, and rub that against clothing. That way, the ashes wouldn’t blend into the fabric, while any natural oils and such got absorbed and worked out.

“What do you do for salt?”

“Salt is a valuable commodity in our land. Our warriors would lose their neutrality if we had to rely on the commercial sector in the southern lands of Haruun, so we select some among them to traverse the Fire Road and purchase it from the ports up North. Thus the government has a monopoly on it.”

“And I hear you eat the meat of those dragonices?”

“Good eatin’ on those things,” Albert chimed in as Garni nodded.

“It is a traditional foodstuff of ours. But it does not store well, so generally we hunt only what we can use during the spawning season.”

“I see. What is that?”

Ashiya was pointing at the eastern wall of the city. A large number of people were clinging to it, supported by lifelines from above.

“Oh, yes, that...”

Garni paused, looking toward Albert.

“It’s fine,” he told him, sensing his concern. “You can treat him as a whole different beast from the demons *we* knew.”

“...All right. Well, they are actually examining the walls before we begin construction work to expand them.”

“They are expanding the walls? Not repairing them?”

Garni turned his eyes upward, a bit conflicted. “Vashrahma has a limited plot

of land, so we have restrictions on the number of children a family can raise. However, the birth rate has gone down in recent years, so after the battle against the Devil King's Army, we've started to expand the walls, and thus our territory, to boost the allowable population."

"....."

The fact they kept statistics was a surprise to Ashiya. But externally, he merely nodded.

"Of course, that work has only begun. For now, we are examining the wall areas weakened by dragonix collisions and reconstructing those parts first. The full construction project will take five or more years to complete."

"Five years?"

If a nation with as few people and resources as this one was conducting a project this large, it likely *would* take that long.

"But doesn't that mean the walls are gonna be wide open for a little while? Not to criticize, but you're not gonna get attacked by someone in the meantime?"

Garni chuckled at Albert's question. "Not as long as Chief Rajid lives and breathes," he breezily replied. "There is no way anyone could defeat Vashrahma, here in the Olidyma Desert."

This wasn't confidence or boasting. It was, to Garni, the obvious result of any attempt.

"We are strong. Vashrahma is the only supply point within the Great Olidyma Desert, a bridge connecting the Southern Island's north and south halves. Turning our land into a battlefield is the same as declaring war on every inch of the Southern Island."

"...Then why have walls at all?"

The question came instantly from Ashiya. Based on Garni's story, it'd seem that the walls had little meaning apart from marking out the nation's borders. There were dragonix infestations to worry about, of course, but thanks to Albert, they had countermeasures now. Thus, if there were no enemy armies

waiting to storm the land, Ashiya wondered how the government could justify outlaying so much funding on walls of this scope and size.

Garni gave Ashiya a surprised look. Then he recalled that the human in front of him was actually a demon. He nodded.

“Only a fool of a human would say without evidence that tomorrow will be just as peaceful as today,” he said. “Warriors train themselves because there may be a battle tomorrow. Merchants save their money because there may be a need for it tomorrow. We enjoy the peace we have today because people do not neglect to prepare for tomorrow. Save a little bit, day after day, and in ten, fifty, a hundred years, it will support those who call Vashrahma home. As long as Vashrahma remains firm, so will the Southern Island. Fail to prepare simply because nothing is happening right now, and the nation will fall that little bit faster. I imagine even Chief Rajid can fight on the front lines for perhaps another ten years, at best. People are lucky if they reach a hundred.”

“...Ah, yes, true.”

Generations proceeded extremely slowly for demons by comparison. The warrior fervently discussing his nation’s future had not even lived a tenth as long as Ashiya—and yet he was viewing tomorrow, the future, more clearly than Ashiya did.

“A fine nation you have.”

The appraisal seemed to satisfy Garni as he walked them over to the next spot.

“So! What did you think of my Vashrahma?”

“A strong nation, indeed. And not just in terms of war power, either. Call it the attitude of your people, influenced by the harsh climate and geography. But I also appreciate how you do not reject weakness, or scarcity.”

That night, Ashiya was extended an unofficial invite to Chief Rajid’s dinner banquet.

“There was a Church site on the outskirts of the city. When was that built?”

“Around two hundred years ago, by a traveling priest who had come here. He

was exiled from Haruun for preaching a ‘pagan’ religion, only to be rescued by a group from Vashrahma as he wandered the desert. Thankful for them, he wound up settling in town, eventually seeing his last days here before joining the sand and the wind. These days, around ten percent of our people are Church adherents.”

“Oh, that many?”

“That’s news to me, too. There wasn’t any conflict? Most of the Southern Island is dominated by sun-worship religions, isn’t it?”

“There’s been no record of conflict, no. I can’t speak for the emirates of Haruun, but in Vashrahma, at least, no one is repelled by people of other religions. In fact, the current priest at our cathedral is fairly...well, beautiful, you could say. I attend services once a month.”

Rajid phrased it in a rather joking manner, but his taking the time to do that was likely why the Church recognized Vashrahma as a full-fledged nation. There was no doubting that it factored into Rajid’s decision.

“And not just the Church, either!” he continued. “The farmers that manage our lands have studied the mountain religions of the Northern Island, and we have sun worshipers of our own here. And while there aren’t many, we have a small temple devoted to the spiritual traditions of the Eastern Island within my fortress’s grounds. If you had come a bit earlier, you could’ve seen them celebrate their holy holiday. A gaudy occasion, let me tell you. Everyplace within the walls is lined with lanterns of a thousand colors, and the streets are filled with stalls at night.”

By his demeanor, it seemed like that was one of Rajid’s favorite moments of the year.

“And *next* week, you know, it’s not as large as that holy holiday, but we have a summer harvest festival that’s also rather impressive. People born in the North prepare this wonderful drink for us from fermented goat’s milk.”

Ashiya tried to imagine this. It sounded a bit like Japanese people celebrating Christmas one week, then New Year’s the next.

“The origins of Vashrahma are among the darker stories you’ll find on the

Southern Island. We are a small nation with a small position in the world—it behooves us to keep our minds and hearts broad. As much as we can, at least.”

Ashiya and Albert, neither too familiar with Vashrahma, sat up in their seats.

“For example, Garni, your guide today, can trace his ancestry back to a man from Tajah, one of the nations that comprise Haruun. Mine comes from Kehvel, again in Haruun. Not counting immigrants from other islands, the majority of us living here can claim ancestors in Haruunian nobility or affiliated families.”

“Nobility?”

“Haruun has a long-held tradition of the firstborn son inheriting the family fortune. Once, in Haruun’s largest city-state, the eldest son of a major family was murdered, leading to all manner of mayhem and the establishment of multiple branch nations. Vashrahma’s ancestors, you could say, are those who lost any chance at an inheritance in their old homelands. A nation of the weak, banding together for strength. Tolerance isn’t everything, but continual intolerance can only lead to conflict.”

“And now you’re the most powerful nation of warriors on the island. Pretty ironic.”

“Our first warrior chief wrote a screed in his journal about how our home nations had best prepare for us to strike back. That journal is one of our nation’s greatest treasures now.”

“Is that...healthy?” Ashiya laughed. It sounded like something a kid would write in his diary about the mean kids in class.

“So are we ready to discuss matters?” Rajid adjusted his posture and turned to Ashiya. “The savior of mankind recommended you to me, and despite your past hostility, I have kindly allowed you to tour our lands. I will hope to be amply rewarded by the news you have for me.”

“Indeed.”

Ashiya placed his goblet of traditional Vashrahman wine—part of the warrior chief’s private cellar, he was told—on the table and nodded.

“I want to make your nation even stronger.”

“Oh, *do* you?”

“But as tolerantly minded as all of you have proven to be, I cannot say whether you will accept this or not.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Ashiya’s following words would grab the attention of both Rajid and anyone else he could’ve said them to.

“But both Hu Shun-len, the Azure Emperor of Efzahan, and Chief Herder Dhin Dhem Wurs have already given their agreement to it. We are currently engaged in concrete discussions with both of them.”

“...!”

Rajid sat up straight, his eyes turned to Albert.

“The Azure Emperor I can’t speak of,” Albert replied, “but old Dhin Dhem’s pretty serious about this, yep.”

“Hmmmm...”

Name-dropping before offering an off-the-wall proposal wasn’t the best negotiating tactic, but names quite simply didn’t get any bigger than these. Even Rajid had to rumble his admiration.

“All right. So if a demon general is treating the head of a tiny desert nation on equal footing with the Azure Emperor and Chief Herder, what sort of business could it possibly be?”

“.....”

Ashiya took a deliberately extended pause before beginning.

“Have you gone mad?”

“How would a human evaluate the sanity of a demon?”

It didn’t take long for Rajid to hear the entirety of Ashiya’s proposal. His eyes darted around at nothing in particular, revealing the disarray it put his mind in. One could ask every warrior in the land, and not one of them could say when their chief had last been this lost.

“Albert, this man... This man is truly...”

“And the thing is, they’re always serious! Doesn’t it make you laugh?”

Albert’s joke likely applied not only to Ashiya here, but also to his cohorts’ entire lifestyle over in Japan.

“Then you realize that I can’t give you an instantaneous response?”

“Of course.” Ashiya nodded. “I imagine you don’t have the unilateral power of an Azure Emperor, or the natural inclination to accept it that Phiyenci did. We are talking about a nation of a different size from those, after all, so I have no intention of forcing matters. But it is no lie that both the Azure Emperor and Dhin Dhem Wurs are ready to join in. It is likely that only the Western Island, where the Church has greater influence, will decline. In a way, it will be first come, first served.”

“Perhaps so, but it’s not the kind of offer the entire world will take up.” Rajid chuckled and took a hefty swig from the goblet nearest to him. “I swear. Ever since your Devil King’s Army arrived, the most bizarre things have been happening to this world.”

“You simply weren’t aware of us. We have always been there.”

“For the sake of a single young child, the Hero and Devil King are uniting to slay a god up above? Not a topic that comes along every day, no! ...So, please, give me some time.”

Rajid wearily stood up, his inebriation making his pace perhaps a tad unsteady as he left the banquet room. Ashiya’s and Albert’s eyes met. But Rajid was back within five minutes—and with a heavy sigh, he presented Ashiya with a small golden object.

At first glance, it seemed to be a compass made of gold—but the needle itself was gold as well, and even when Ashiya received the nod to take it in his hands, it seemed to spin around at random, never settling on a direction. Albert seemed befuddled as well, but the attendants serving Rajid were visibly astonished.

“Take it. Consider it a deposit. It contains a secret formula crafted by ancient arts. Only the king of Haruun himself possesses another.”

“The king of the emirates... Wait, you mean what King Ezramha told me...”

“I gave King Ezramha another one in advance. Yes, as you surmised, this is a cipher linking the leaders of Vashrahma and Haruun. It contains a magical device that lets the warrior chief of Vashrahma converse with their king. I’ll show you how to use it later.”

The Haruun royal family had retained, for many years, a way of tapping into the warriors of Vashrahma. When they received the call, Vashrahma could then make contact with other kingdoms of Haruun, ensuring the initial request was for a just cause. In other words, anyone possessing this golden compass was in a de facto alliance with Rajid’s land.

“I thoroughly understand your offer. This may very well affect the future of our nation, and I would prefer to debate over it without preconceptions. But it is a delicate issue. I doubt it will all work out very neatly. So please understand that this is the will not of a nation, but of me as an individual.”

“...Thank you.”

Ashiya bowed his head down. He figured he could interpret this as Rajid’s approval. And with the skills that he and his nation’s people possessed, things should turn out well, even if it wound up taking a certain amount of time.

“Ah, yes. And while I am not seeking payback, would you mind listening to a request of mine?”

“What is that?”

“I want to see your true form.”

“Whoa...”

“Chief, are you...?”

This alarmed Rajid’s attendants, to say nothing of Albert. Rajid raised a hand to silence them.

“It strikes me that this is a wise man before me. One a little *too* human, in fact. I would never doubt Albert at this point in time, but if you reveal your true form to us, it would do much to convince everyone else in this room. It’d show them you are one demon who can be reasoned with.”

Judging by Ashiya’s face, he wasn’t expecting this. But Rajid did have a point.

“Very well. If I could have some space, please? Albert, erect a barrier of holy force, just in case.”

“Uh, you’re really gonna do it?”

“Warrior Chief Rajid has been open-minded with me from the beginning. I must be open with my own powers in turn.”

With that, he stood up and walked a distance from the other people in the room. Rajid, eyes full of curiosity, watched his every move, his attendants looking on with far warier gazes.

“No need to brace yourselves so much. It is really nothing too impressive.”

Then he removed the top of the Vashrahman clothing lent to him. The looks on Rajid’s entourage begged him to say what he was doing. “I wouldn’t want to tear it,” he explained, eliciting a laugh from Albert and nobody else.

Suddenly—

“...!”

In a moment, a plume of black flame erupted.

“Ohh...!” exclaimed Rajid, full of wonder—and in the next blink of an eye, the tall, wispy man who had collapsed from heatstroke in the desert was gone, replaced by a gigantic form with shell-like armor and a barbed, two-pronged tail, towering even higher than Rajid.

“I see...”

“Wh-whoa...!” Albert tried to stop Rajid as he approached Ashiya without a moment’s hesitation.

“No need to fear. This level of demonic force is but a passing breeze to the likes of me!” Rajid shooed him away, then stood in front of the Great Demon General Alciel. The tension in the air made it difficult to breathe. Alciel waited.

“I suppose this force of yours presented some issues in the North and East.”

“It was no harm to the more powerful among them. People like you, in fact.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t. And *ours* is a land of warriors.” Rajid smiled, thoroughly enjoying this. “All right. Allow me to take charge and proceed with this offer.”

He placed a hand on the iron-like shoulder of his former adversary, a foe to all mankind.

“When your battle against heaven is done, we will see about accepting the demon realms’ citizens as our own.”



At roughly the same day as Ashiya’s visit to Vashrahma, Suzuno was being jostled around on a wagon trundling down the main highway to Sankt Ignoreido, on the western tip of the Western Island. For Suzuno, it was a long-overdue homecoming. The air of Sankt Ignoreido, as sampled through the window, made her boundlessly restless.

The insides of the Church cathedral here were nowhere near as solemn and tranquil as people thought.

Here, on the western tip of the island, the scene was dominated by the sacred mountain of Ignoreido. At the foot of it was a great shrine, and around it was a town known as Shrine City—and the believers who lived there were abuzz with both rumors and a sense of exaltation, putting them in an almost trancelike state.

The loss of Archbishop Robertio must be mourned, but with his death came a divine revelation as clear as day. It made everyone giddy around town, just like when the Hero Emilia had defeated Lucifer in the name of the Church’s knights.

“People are the same everywhere, I suppose.”



The people of Sankt Ignoreido were not exactly chosen ones, the upper echelons of Church practitioners. But its residents still took pride in living within a holy land. That alone guaranteed a certain level of pious devotion among them. Now, however, with the order to mobilize from the Archbishops fresh on their minds, they seemed full of a more self-centered pride, arrogance perhaps, that the group they were a part of was finally about to deliver justice upon the world. It was little different from someone driven to action by their nation, or king, or people.

Notices exhorting peasants, merchants, travelers, and mercenaries to join the knight corps' volunteer armies were posted everywhere, their courageous purple prose emphasizing the validity of the revelation and demanding vengeance against the unknown evil smoldering in the Central Continent. Each one of them seemed to draw great crowds wherever the notices were nailed up.

"People are lining up to volunteer. We've gathered nearly twice the donations we usually receive..." explained Henri Vazzo, Suzuno's assistant and a Reconciliation Panel official aware of the details behind the battle against heaven, as he joined her for the ride.

"Is that true across the land?"

"It would appear so, yes."

"Quite the revival, then."

With the declaration of a "crusade" from the knights, things were rapidly coming to a head across the Western Island. People, goods, and money began moving long distances, greatly stimulating the economy. It could be called the most miraculous crusade since the founding of the Church. Joining it—or supporting it—would be a *great honor*, and serving all those throngs seeking honor was *good business*. It was all driving the Western Island nations ruled heart and soul by the Church into a frenzy.

Suzuno watched all of this with sullen eyes, but as she surmised, this was not at all a bad trend.

"Well? How many cases has the Reconciliation Panel received?"

“Ah, the members of the Panel are practically crying out for you to come home and join the conference they’re holding for this drive.”

Suzuno laughed at Henri. “...I see.”

In other words, they had a mountain of proposals on hand, just waiting for Suzuno, the head of their organization, to say yes to them. She looked up from her wagon’s main-street vantage point at the vast shrine before her and smiled.

“I look forward to seeing how many monsters this small body of mine can fend off.”

“Crestia Bell, chief councilor of the Reconciliation Panel, has returned!”

When Suzuno arrived at the shrine, she didn’t stop for a moment at the condolence service for Robertio, open to the general public. Instead she marched straight into the office of Archbishop Cervantes Reberiz, the de facto leader of the crusade.

“Thank you for coming so far to see me, Bishop Bell. I am sure you grew used to the clear waters of Saint Aile?”

He chided her for being away from headquarters for so long, but she expected that, so she fought back.

“Thank you. The food at the Holy Magic Administrative Institute was all rather sweetly flavored. I fear I may have gained some weight.”

“How has Olba been?”

“I cannot say. Myself and Director Emeralda have no right to intervene in Saint Aile’s justice system, so I cannot tell you any more than the stories going around about his statements.”

“Oh? Ah, well.” Cervantes nodded, remaining seated at his desk as he pointed at the door behind Suzuno. “I need you to address your work at once. We must have every knight in the Church mobilized.”

“Yes, sir. I will do everything I can...but before that, is it all right if I asked you something?”

“Later, please. I am busy.”

“It will take but a short moment. Lord Cervantes, I have worked in the ministry for a long time now, but something bothers me.”

“Oh?”

“Was it God who appeared in the Archbishops’ dreams?”

“.....”

Cervantes gave Suzuno a look of surprise. He tried searching for an ulterior motive behind the query, but quickly shook his head.

“I...do not think so, no.”

Now it was Suzuno who was surprised. Cervantes, a symbol of what confidence and a crying need for more, more, more can accomplish for a man, was hesitant about the most vital question of the day.

“Was it an angel, then?”

“...Perhaps. Its form was not as described in scripture or tradition.”

“If you will forgive my rudeness, why was it declared to be a holy dream, then?”

This rankled Cervantes a bit, this revealing of Suzuno’s doubts, but he quickly reconsidered. He was far higher in Church hierarchy than Suzuno, but toying with the Reconciliation Panel might cause it to question the validity of the entire crusade. It was Robertio and Cervantes themselves who spearheaded the Panel’s founding, and since Robertio’s death had spurred this crusade, Cervantes, as the presumptive leader, would never think of spurning Suzuno and her group.

“It was, at the very least, something not of this world. More than anything, Verdigris, Cesar, and Mauro all had the same dream, where they saw the same figure. Does that suffice?”

Verdigris Chirico, Cesar Quaranta, and Mauro Valli were the current surviving members of the Six Archbishops alongside Cervantes.

“Allow me to say this. The assignment here is to mobilize every member of the Church’s knight corps. A revelation from a figure not in our scripture could perhaps be a demonic conspiracy.”

“Bishop Bell, are you insinuating that all of these Archbishops are foolish enough to be tempted by the devil?”

“Of course not. But even if it is in form only, we need to pin down the guide within this holy dream. Otherwise, we will have nothing to so much as create a crusade banner with.”

“.....”

Cervantes fell silent. But he didn’t seem peeved, and he wasn’t the type to betray that on his face anyway. He understood this was the kind of thing the Reconciliation Panel was designed to intervene about—that’s why he was trying to counter her with this strong-worded but unusually sketchy defense, no doubt.

A “crusade,” or large-scale mobilization of knights, required a symbol, expressed by an angel or piece of scripture. If that symbol was an angel, then an angel was imprinted on a flag; if it was some other holy device, it would be that instead. This banner was proof that the justness of this movement had been sworn to the scriptures and to God. In the past, there had even been a crusade featuring Sariel, front and center, on its banner.

“Would it be possible for the Archbishops to come to an agreement on the appearance of the figure in their holy dreams, and describe it in concrete terms? Then I could pore through our scripture and literature and make the necessary arrangements.”

The lack of a banner would affect the ordering dates for anything that required a printed design. It was one of the first tools the Church had to convince other nations to join in. Any delay on its design would be ill advised. But in the midst of all this work, attempting to align the schedules of all four Archbishops was a Herculean task. Considering that, Cervantes revealed a silent moment of anger, but quickly checked it back into the pit of his stomach and gave Suzuno a generous nod.

“...Very well. That *is* an important issue. I will summon an Archbishop conference as soon as possible and send an envoy your way afterward. For now, please focus on your accumulated work duties. All right?”

“Thank you, sir. In that case, I will offer my condolences to Archbishop

Robertio's relations and then attend to work."

"....."

He had just *told* her to get to work, but instead she was going on about mourning Robertio. It rubbed him the wrong way. This was Suzuno—Bishop Crestia Bell, head and chief councilor of the Reconciliation Panel. He doubted these "condolences" would involve simply placing some flowers and writing her name in the memorial book. No, she'd have to visit Robertio Igua Valentia's relatives, his dependents, and locations related to him, or else it'd violate order and manner in the Church. And even if she kept her travels within Sankt Ignoreido, going around to offer her greetings would take up at least four days by itself.

But Cervantes couldn't stop her. This whole movement had been kicked off, after all, by Robertio's death. And if it came out that he'd told her not to offer her condolences to a man so greatly revered the world over, that alone could endanger his post.

"We are all shaken by this sudden turn of events. But please try to be quick, so as not to cause trouble for others."

"I will endeavor to. Thank you for your time. Excuse me."

"You may go."

Suzuno knew that he didn't exactly take kindly to this. It must've taken nerves of steel for Cervantes to say that and let her go without changing his expression.

"This will do at first. For now, I should focus on my work."

Going too far with this could put suspicious eyes upon her. So once she was sure her opening jab had had the right effect, she hurried straight over to the Reconciliation Panel's meeting hall.

"Ah! Bishop Bell!"

"Crestia! We've been expecting you!"

"Oh, wonderful! Now we can stop getting yelled at!"

The Panel members noticing her return all breathed sighs of relief, their faces

visibly loosening.

“Everyone, I apologize for leaving my seat vacant for so long. Now that I am back, I wish to devote all I can to my duties. I look forward to your support as we seek a truer faith.”

“Right!”

“Understood!”

“Um, if we could start with these documents...”

Her team, no longer able to stand the strain in many ways, were all smiles now.

“To tell you the truth, I have only returned just now. I haven’t even paid my respects to Archbishop Robertio where they are needed. I apologize, but please allow me to be absent a little longer. Henri, you take care of the rest.”

“Yes, Bishop. Safe travels.”

“Wha...? Whaaaaat?!”

“Bishop! You must be joking!”

“H-Henri! Um, we’ve received mounds of requests for decisions from all over today as well...!”

Hearing the shouts of her panel behind her, Suzuno issued them a silent apology in her heart as she returned to her long-abandoned office. There were condolences to be offered now.

“Ahh...I wish I were back in Villa Rosa Sasazuka.”

The office of the chief councilor, no doubt cleaned and purified in her absence, was a place she found nearly impossible to relax in. Still, Henri and the other pious, sincere people under her had kept this room intact for her.

Suzuno opened the closet to find a set of freshly starched mourning robes, which looked like they were straight from the seamstresses. Funeral clothing in Japan was largely black in color; in the Church, it was white. Dressed in a robe of pure white, she put on her ceremonial biretta cap and looked at herself in the closet mirror. The robe was cuffed low enough to drag on the floor, the

sleeves drooping downward, and the angular cap seemed far too tall for her head. It almost looked like something a bride would wear to a traditional Japanese wedding.

“Hee-hee... The perfect outfit for a heretic who hid from God and got named a Great Demon General, perhaps.”

Suzuno enjoyed the moment with a smile, then glared at the image in the mirror, tightening her face. Her exchange with Cervantes was a jab, a mere feeler. The battle had only just begun.

“Right. Off we go.”



“Are you suuure you should waste tiime up here?”

“It’s fine. I’m tired.”

“But the royal guard was just inquiring about you a few miiinutes ago. They asked if you were coming to viiisit.”

“Well, I’m not.”

Erenium, the capital of the holy land of Saint Aile, was home to the Holy Magic Administrative Institute. On the roof of that building, Hazel Rumack was sitting on a deck chair she had found somewhere, sampling from a copper jug filled with cheap wine from a coffee table next to her as she read a book. “Wasting time” was a charitable way of putting it. She was avoiding work with every fiber of her body.

As head of the Institute, Emeralda Etuva was expecting this reply to some extent.

“Well, if you can’t visit them, then ohhh well. By the way, would you like to enjoy some of these cookies with meee?”

“Let’s see them.”

Emeralda took out a folding bench of her own and sat next to Rumack.

“Too bad we’re not closer to the beeeach, huh?”

“It’s a little early to go sunbathing over there yet. The light up here is perfect.”

Because Erenium had a higher latitude than Isla Centurum and Devil's Castle, the weather was dry this time of year, but the sun was soft and perfect for lounging around in.

"Speaking of the beeeach, did you handle the Lamoise affaaair?"

"What's that? I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, so you diiid, eh? That was a good job, yesss, but it was almost too good, so I built us a little 'out' for it."

Emeralda and Rumack were both scarfing down cookies from a metal tin with the logo of a famous Japanese sweets maker. The delicious aroma of butter surrounded them.

"It'd be a bad idea to defy them on the surrrface, after all. So I arraaanged things so Church logistics will be handled with a high-capacity sea roooute."

"Based on my calculations, I blocked the movement of Church goods by a week, essentially. If I got discovered and punished for that, I could enjoy the rest of my life in peace, but you just *had* to intervene, didn't you?"

"Now, nowwww..."

Lamoise was the largest port city on the Western Island, located on its eastern edge and overseen by the Republic of Kierence. It had been heavily damaged by the Devil King's Army, but being a city of merchants, they began rebuilding quickly under Lucifer's rule, which put it on far better footing than the inland cities after the war. This was less of a glowing review than it would seem at first glance; the other port towns west of Lamoise were testaments to how intense the fight against Lucifer's army was, all but razed with many still not rebuilt. Since most cities hadn't regained anywhere near their full functionality, sea trade with other islands was largely running through Lamoise.

And now, of course, there was this crusade work. Lamoise was already running at near maximum in terms of goods and personnel, but this had the potential to completely overwhelm it. Lumack just, you know, tinkered with it some more.

Being under Kierence jurisdiction, not Saint Aile, she couldn't mess around with Lamoise directly. What she could do was gather Saint Aile's armies to build

a major distribution warehouse at breakneck speed, creating a hub for land transport that Saint Aile had full control over. Lamoise no doubt wondered what Saint Aile was doing, but this warehouse not only lightened the load for the larger countries of the world, but also let the owners charge whatever tax they wanted for its use. It couldn't have been better.

Maintaining this warehouse required more personnel and goods, however, and also created traffic jams along the island's logistical pipeline. And with more logistical hubs, more people and things would start gathering to these sites, improving the economy and attracting more money—an upward spiral that made it harder than ever for the Church to stage any major campaigns in the area.

But Rumack didn't end it there. She even instituted a system where, as long as you had a permit from Lamoise, you earned a discount for any goods or people crossing the Saint Aile border. Supplies for the Church knights' crusade wouldn't necessarily all be sent to Sankt Ignoreido, but Saint Aile was still the largest nation on the Western Island, so it was already a hub for commerce. If people and their wares could travel through it at lower cost, they would naturally flock to it.

Although this measure was meant on the surface to concentrate the Church's supply lines and keep prices down, the fact was that logistics on the Western Island just weren't developed enough to handle this sudden surge in demand. The roads weren't paved like in Japan; they turned into mud after the slightest rainstorm, sucking wagons into huge ruts. Commerce was expanding, but the highway infrastructure lagged far behind—and as a result, the Western Island couldn't handle any of this new business, leading to enormous delays.

However, traffic jams didn't cause shortages in and of themselves, of course. It meant more goods and resources at lower prices for Saint Aile, ensuring an abundance of supplies for its own citizens. Prices were on the rise for other nations nearby, but supplies were still plentiful, so none of them were panicking and taking countermeasures yet. Plus, if shipping was delayed into the two great ports of Lamoise and Saint Aile, they'd be just as delayed getting out.

And meanwhile, Rumack was sunbathing on the roof.

“If I kept this up, someone would’ve taken me to task on it, complaining that I could’ve arranged things better. If I step down, I’ll probably be replaced by one general or the other from the Pippin faction, and you *know* he wouldn’t be able to do half the job I could, so that’d be even more of an obstacle for the Church. Meanwhile, our nation keeps its dignity intact the whole time.”

“A new Pippin general?” Emeralda smiled. “Oh, cut me a breaaak. My nose is wrinkling up so much, I’m afraid it’ll fall off. Besiides, this is muuuch more than just an ‘out.’ The sea route takes a northerly route to the eeeast, so their shipments will start going to Noza Quartus, not Wezu Quartus.”

“...!”

Rumack’s expression finally changed.

“Are you sure that’s all right?”

“Nooo, I don’t think sooo! But it comes as a steeeal in terms of a regular trade route, so even if it creates problems, it’s not myyy issue.”

“No, maybe not...”

“I’ve merely doing my levvvvel best as a believer in the Churrrrch.”

“You sneaky fox.”

“Whooo’s a fox?” Emeralda’s cheeks puffed out.

“*That’s* what you’re angry about?”

“Besiides, it’s true that Wezu Quartus, the western entrance to the Central Connnntinent, hasn’t rebuilt as quickly as elllsewhere! If the knights want saaafe passage there, they’ll need to go around to the North or South Continents aaanyway!”

“I know. That’s why I called you a sneaky fox.”

“Ugghh!”

The Central Continent housed four major ports, each serving as a commercial entryway for goods from one of the other four islands. There was Ea Quartus to the east, Wezu Quartus to the west, Saza Quartus down south, and Noza Quartus to the north. These served as the arms and legs of Isla Centurum in the

center, and if the times called for it, each port could function as an independent entity.

All of these cities, of course, had suffered serious damage from the Devil King's Army, with Wezu and Saza Quartus still cruel testaments to the work of the Great Demon Generals assigned to them. Both of them still had a long way to go with rebuilding. Meanwhile, Noza Quartus not only had escaped with the least damage, but still looked like the city it was before, for the most part. Adramelech, charged with capturing it, had never been a fan of needless destruction, and the Bluehorn Clan he'd led was also not gifted with aerial skills, another major factor.

The large bodies of Bluehorns made long-distance travel by wyvern a great difficulty; to invade the Northern Island from the Central Continent, they had to use both Gates and the same boats that anyone else would use. Their gifts with water-and ice-based magic also let them deal a punishing first shot to the Northern Island's people in an epic sea battle, robbing them of the will to fight.

In the end, almost ninety percent of supplies to the Central Continent post-Devil King were routed through the North or the East. Noza Quartus did business with more than just the Northern Island, of course; there were even routes that went straight up there from Southern ports. However, the Northern Island still held a powerful influence over Noza Quartus, not only in political clout but in the size and depth of its commercial routes. Essentially, it was possible to travel from the Western Island to Noza Quartus, but only via thinly plied routes. Considering the crusade and the business it would bring, more than half of the knights would have to travel through the Northern Island on their journey.

If these ships were simply carrying supplies for rebuilding, it wouldn't be such a difficult trek to take. The same was true for the Federated Order, charged with the peaceful mission of rebuilding the Central Continent. But no, this was an armed invasion carried out by Church knights who didn't have all that much authority outside the Western Island. Certain routes would never welcome them.

"I know it doesn't look that way, but I'm a busy person. I don't have the time to serve as a go-between with the Chief Herder on the Northern Island,

whether you ask me to or not.”

“Yes, well, with my current position, I’m not sure any of the dignitaries up North would even want to see meee.”

Rumack and Emeraldal were being shameless.

“I’m suuure the army will have some trouble securing a roooute to take.”

“You said it. But I’m sure it’s just another trial placed upon them by God, to test their faith.”

“Indeed. You’re absolutely riiight.” Emeraldal turned toward the northeastern sky. “And that shoould make it easier to speak to Emiilia in Japan.”



“Are the humans growing restless?”

“They are, my lord. I think Hazel Rumack’s departure has had a serious effect on them.”

“...I anticipated it, but it has arrived rather quickly. Not even a week has elapsed.”

The report from Farfarello, current head chieftain of the Malebranche, made Ashiya want to rub his forehead.

Upon returning from Vashrahma, he and Albert were greeted with the news that, with their royal general gone, the loyalty of the Western Island natives among their forces was starting to waver. The main human force pitted in the battle against heaven was the Knights of the Eight Great Scarves from the Eastern Island, as arranged by Ashiya—but despite being the “main” force, their numbers were little different from any other on the island.

The question was simply whether Ashiya was trusted as the leader on the field here, but with Rumack’s mediation up to now, the troops from the West were on fairly friendly terms with him. However, following word of the mass Church knight conscription, the leaders from the West were now back home, causing major consternation. Be it Saint Aile’s royal forces, the Holy Magic Administrative Institute, or the Reconciliation Panel, many soldiers on Isla Centurum were affiliated with one or the other—but since Rumack, Emeraldal,

and Suzuno were elsewhere, their respective seconds-in-command were now in charge. But these were leaders only by name in this effort, and not all of them had much experience in battle or troop command. Compared to the Eight Great Scarves or the demons, they were being overwhelmed.

“Albert...” Ashiya turned to the man for help.

“Lemme just say, they fully understand I’m here, so...” Albert looked fairly cowed, the confidence he’d brimmed with in his dealings with Rajid a thing of the past.

“So the glory of the Hero’s companion cannot compete against real-life politics?”

“It doesn’t mesh too well with the Western folk, I suppose. Especially with Eme’s guys.”

Emeralda and Rumack had discussed Albert’s troubles dealing with bureaucrats from the West before. While they were still around, he’d served as a talented go-between for the West and the East sides, so Ashiya didn’t consider that a problem very much. But Albert was a native to the North who had led an army composed of multiple races and tribes, while the nations of the West were all either entirely or predominantly homogenous. With that differing sort of historical background, Albert’s frank, clear-cut personality was taken as thoughtless, overly loose, and sometimes he was treated as a petulant rule breaker.

Now that was manifesting itself in the worst way possible. He may have been serving as a faithful go-between with the East, but if push came to shove, the prevailing impression was that Albert wouldn’t be a staunch ally for the West.

“If you’re not interested in continuing, I wish we could command you to return home.” Farfarello sighed.

“That is not quite possible,” Ashiya said with a smirk, appreciating the sentiment. “Right now, we cannot afford to make enemies out of everybody in the West. They are disturbed right now not simply because Rumack and her allies are gone. They are beginning to have doubts over whether their mission is truly right.”

It was already a minority of the world who had volunteered to team with demons to destroy God. And most of the people from the Western Island were pious members of the Church. They'd be happy to worship people like Sariel and Gabriel as long as they didn't know who they *really* were, but when it came to killing the god that led them, that was just a nonstarter for most of them.

"Besides, don't we have Gabriel? Won't havin' those angels with us keep the Western people satisfied?"

Albert recalled that they had archangels, subjects of worship from the West, on hand. But Ashiya shook his head.

"What they worship are the angels as they exist in their scripture and faith. Not the *real* ones, with wings and vast stores of power."

Whether he meant it or not, Ashiya's analysis matched the one Suzuno had given to Olba on the Eastern Island. Albert himself had said it to Farfarello during their breakfast summit the other day.

"To them, God is a living, existing thing—but if some powerful figure descends in front of them, they can't accept that as God. That's easy to see if you unravel God as described in their scriptures and mythology. The miracles he engineers are always these vague, roundabout matters, nothing that leaves any physical evidence behind. They truly believe that God is not of this world, but from some higher plane. Their piousness is why they think next to nothing of 'real life' gods and angels. And now we have the 'holy dreams' of the Archbishops. *That* is much closer to the God and angels they believe in."

Ashiya took a moment to sigh.

"It is a thorny issue. We could have suppressed it if we had at least one Church representative out of Bell, Emeraldal, or Rumack here, but as demons, we had no way to keep them on hand."

"Can't we call in Emilia?"

"No. We cannot call her to Ente Isla if our allies are to remain in the dark about our fight in the demon realms earlier. If our adversary in that laboratory truly managed to neutralize her holy sword, there is no guarantee that foe will not choose to attack us here. Then Emilia truly *will* be neutralized, and Alas

Ramus may be taken as well. And have you forgotten the events of Heavensky?”

Farfarello and Albert looked at Ashiya, eyes wide open.

“The power of the person in the space suit had an effect on those with *holy* energy. Just imagine if we brought Emilia over here—what better prize to attract our astronaut friend? Why, we’d hardly need to wait for our Church knights to show up—the human forces would be soundly defeated by the time they did, and the war would be over before it began.”

“Then there seems to be no recourse, no.”

“I suppose we’ll just need to keep assuring people and leavin’ them in the dark, eh?”

“Perhaps offer a larger ration of the *cho-co-lehte* General Sasaki provided, or the like...ah, but that would accomplish little.”

Farfarello meant that as a joke, perhaps—

“Hmm... Not a bad idea.”

—but Shirou Ashiya didn’t take it as such.

“Excellent! I shall prepare some chocolate and distribute it as a bonus!”

It was time for Ashiya’s househusband skills to shine once more. The dark green apron that he suddenly took out of some mystery pocket flapped in the wind—but Albert hurriedly stopped him.

“Whoa, whoa, calm down! Yes, that treat was popular among the human folk, but a lot of that was because that girl Chiho was crafting it. Can’t you picture what’ll happen when it comes out that *you* made it?! There’ll be all sorts of terrible rumors about how you poisoned it or something!”

“Poison? *Poison?! Do you think I would ever play with my food like that?! I have manned the kitchen of Devil’s Castle for months on end! How dare you insult me!*”

“Lord Alciel?!”

“I, Shirou Ashiya, have toiled day and night to fill the hearts and stomachs of

those I serve! And I would dare to poison someone's chocolate?!"

"Look, it's not a matter of your talents or your resolve! The fact it's handmade by a demon is a just problem in itself!"

If Emi, Suzuno, or Urushihara were here, they would likely have a more cutting rejoinder for him. Albert was doing his best.

"Accursed humans... Are you saying you cannot enjoy my chocolate?!"

"Why are you so pained about that?"

"But this is an important time for Ms. Sasaki. She is entering a new school year, and the manager at her workplace has changed. We are obliged to restrict personnel movements at the moment, and I would feel terrible for bringing her here when things are in such disarray."

"If General Sasaki is off the table, there is another human girl from Japan we could turn to."

"Hmm?"

"The Hero Emilia's friend, as she was called. Many humans saw Rumack treat her as an equal here. She seems somewhat older than General Sasaki as well. I think we would be safe with her."

Ashiya, realizing Farfarello was talking about Rika Suzuki, shook his head even harder. "N-no, no no no, we cannot."

"Why not? General Sasaki told us that anyone could make *cho-co-lehte* as long as they had the correct molds. If it would be difficult to have her make them, perhaps she could at least provide us with other sweet treats from her world..."

"No, that is not the issue. Asking her for such a favor would be...ah, a tad awkward."

"Huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"It is an issue between two...humans of Japan."

""?"

Albert and Farfarello were both as confused, a rare case of common agreement between human and demon. Seeing Ashiya as inarticulate as this was also a rarity indeed—but from his perspective, he couldn't be blamed. After all, not only had he thoroughly rejected Rika's advances, but he had given her absolutely nothing on White Day, leaving that entirely to Maou instead. Asking her for chocolate just to keep things from coming to a boil over here... There was no way he could stoop that low.

"R-regardless, Ms. Suzuki is a normal human as well, and there is no way we could bring her back to a powder keg like this one! Think of another approach!"

"Another approach? *Is* there one? Not like anyone would wanna have any chocolate I cooked up..."

"Stop thinking about chocolate!"

"You're the one who brought it up."

"Yes, but no matter what measure we take, I still remain anxious over how cut off from world events our troops are. Even here, we cannot afford to attempt open contact with Rumack, or Emeralda, or General Crestia Bell. Our soldiers must be nervous that they'd all be branded heretics and exiled when they return home...and I am unsure what we can do about that."

The three of them had two issues that needed to be resolved. One was to assuage their troops, convincing them they were not in the minority. The other was to guarantee what they were doing was just.

Rumack's absence, along those lines, had a huge impact. To natives of the West, the name of the Empire of Saint Aile's royal guard general held perhaps even more sway than that of royalty or nobility. But her departure at this point in time further encouraged the impression that her nation wouldn't back up the properness of her actions. It would foment doubt among the troops over whether Rumack had tricked them into joining her personal conspiracy.

It wasn't the sort of issue they could solve with some nicer treatment or bonus rations. If their bodies were here but their hearts were off in distant lands, one burst seam could erupt into a huge hole that ate into the entire plan.

"For now, we will have to try currying favor with them. Albert, there is no one

else I can leave them with apart from you right now. Use your reputation as the Hero's companion to unite them for us.”

“Right. Thanks for the completely faithless order. I mean, I'll try, but I really can't keep them together for long. If worse comes to worst, wouldn't it be better to just light up Devil's Castle already and retreat back to the demon realms?”

“...If I *could* do that,” grumbled Ashiya, “I would have long ago.”

They were in danger. The entire Church knight corps was marching for the Central Continent, and they were in no position to evade them. That was why Suzuno had made the proposal already.

“The heavens and demon realms are both, in the end, moons orbiting around Ente Isla. Just because they are hanging above us, that does not mean we can simply fire a rocket straight at one.”

Maou had decided to schedule the battle against heaven for July, and not solely because Alas Ramus's provisional birthday fell in that month. Based on their calculations, July in Japan provided the most ideal path for a flight from Isla Centurum to the world of heaven, the blue moon in the sky. If they wanted to flee to the demon realms, the red moon, they'd need to wait another month for the most suitable window—and once they did, they'd have to blast off from there.

Both the red and the blue moons revolved around Ente Isla at roughly the same speed, with heaven ahead positionally. It just wasn't realistic to shoot a rocket from the demon realms and have it catch up with heaven. Once they fled to the red moon, they'd have to more likely travel around Ente Isla itself, going in the opposite direction of the moons' orbit—but such a complicated flight plan would take time to calculate, and nobody knew if the ideal window for that was coming anytime soon. Thus, they wanted to stick it out as long as they could from this spot, the home of their most ideal route, and fly directly to heaven.

Albert looked at the anguished Ashiya and sighed. “Yeah, I know. But it is what it is. I'm used to playin' the villain by now, so I guess I'll try to whip some sense into 'em. Hey, Farfarello, could you help divide up the demons and

humans a little... Hmm?”

Just then, a figure rushed into the Devil’s Castle throne room.

“Lord Alciel! Farlo!”

“Mm? Ciriatto?”

“What is it?”

It was Ciriatto, one of the Malebranche chieftains. “Humans have been sighted! From neither the East nor the West!”

“Wha?”

“What was that?!”

This news, in the middle of already painful talks, further agitated the three of them.

“What is the meaning of this? Did an army get sent through a Gate?!”

“N-no, um... There *is* a Gate, yes, but it’s only two people,” Ciriatto answered.

“What?! Knight captains, then? Or Church assassins or the like...?”

The unexpected circumstances of this breach flustered everyone on hand. But the truth was elsewhere.

“No, my liege... I think Libicocco knows them. They are speaking below right now.”

“Libicocco? *Speaking* to them?”

“Yes. They are calling for His Demonic Highness, or Emilia, or anyone who can understand them.”

“Hearing about them secondhand is accomplishing nothing. Let us descend.”

If it was only two humans, they could handle matters if a fight broke out. Ciriatto did little to clarify anything, but Ashiya transformed into demon form (just in case) and did a quick dive down to the surface, Albert and Farfarello coming soon behind.

Quickly, the situation became clear. From above, they could see a ring of people, Libicocco’s gigantic form in the middle. The strange thing, though, was

that all the people gathered were deeply bowing.

“What on...?”

Libicocco looked up at the confused Alciel. The Great Demon General was clearly a sight for sore eyes.

“What is going on? I hear humans came here through a Gate.”

The humans on the scene, not used to the splendor of his demon form, cowered a little. But the next moment, a shrill voice admonished them all.

“‘Waah! Waah, demons, demons!’ Why are you all wailing like a child in a crib? Are you all a bunch of hapless weaklings, ready to flee at a moment’s notice? And you call yourselves the handpicked elites of Hazel Rumack’s Saint Aile force? Where is your *discipline*?!”

The voice sounded familiar. When they realized who it belonged to, Alciel—and, more than anyone, Albert—opened their eyes wide in shock.

“It’s about time you came! First you visit my homeland with your sweet words, then when I come hurrying over, you leave me to rot out here! You’ve got guts, pulling a trick like that!”

The figure about to send the enormous Libicocco reeling was an old woman dressed in Northern Island clothing, not even half the height of Alciel, and with only one person accompanying her. But the force and majesty of her carriage imparted a sense of *history*, one that overpowered even the Great Demon General.

“Ah, ahh...”

“Wh-why are you here...?”

“Lord Alciel! Albert! Who is this...?”

The old woman glaring up at Alciel, Albert, and Farfarello was wearing a monocle with a purple jewel on it.

“Li’l Broccoli, you know, she had the gall to come begging for me.”

“Little...?”

Alciel raised an eyebrow, but the old woman wasn’t the sort to pay such

shallow doubts any mind.

“She tells me, ‘Oh, these high-and-mighty chosen warriors are busy wetting their pants over the demons’ just because she and her pals are out of the picture. I can’t have *that*, so I lifted up my weary bones and paid you a visit, like a grandma visiting her favorite kids. You’d better thank me for this!”

After finishing her tirade against the group, all browbeaten into silence, the old woman turned around and faced the Western Island soldiers kneeling to her.

“No matter what happens,” she called out in her clear voice, “I, Chief Herder Dhin Dhem Wurs, guarantee to you that your battle is just, and that when the time comes in the far future, you will *always* have a meal ticket with me! You got that? Now go get your nappies wrapped back around your butts and get out of here!!”

The oratorical skills and influence of Chief Herder Dhin Dhem Wurs echoed across not only the Northern Island, but the entire world. They were enough to shout down and overwhelm the demons, just as they quickly restored the morale of the Western Island’s soldiers.

“Right.”

Noticing the spring in the soldiers’ step, Wurs glared right back at Albert.

“That was all Li’l Broccoli asked me for. Outside of Alciel, which one of you knows the most about that land they call Japan?! You got all these big names here sittin’ silently, and nobody’s steppin’ up?!”

“Um, would that be you, Albert?” asked the overpowered Alciel.

Albert shook his head. “No... Well, I hear a lot about it, but I’ve only been there once and not for too long, so I can’t say I’m that knowledgeable... What about Gabriel?”

“Gabriel is the keystone of our defense here. I do not want him away for even a moment. Dhin Dhem Wurs, why am I out of the question?”

“Why else? With the Devil King gone, *you’re* the boss around here, and the boss sure can’t leave. I want one of you to come to Phiyenci with me. Nobody’s

going to complain about an Idea Link or a Gate from Phiyenci, now are they? That's your big problem right now, ain't it? Not bein' able to easily talk to anyone in Japan?"

"?!"

Alciel and Albert could feel the scales tipping in front of their eyes.

"We have a Church knight contingent on the Northern Island, but not a big one, and none of them have the balls to call me out on my behavior. Emeraldal already gave me one of those 'phones' or whatever you call 'em, so I'm offering to let you use the Goat Pasture as a relay base. Besides, I want to talk with that talented young granddaughter of mine again—and if people can travel between here and Phiyenci as a side effect, then hooray, what a bonus! So do you have anyone or not?"

"...I think I could fill the bill," Farfarello said softly. "I have extensive experience living in Japan and have learned how to look and act human, so I think I would not be too out of place in the Goat Pasture. Ciriatto can command the demons here. What do you think, Lord Alciel?"

There was a time when Farfarello lived in Japan with Erone. If Wurs was offering a connection to Japan to them, the demon would make a good attendant for her.

"Are you up for it?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Chief Herder Wurs, my thanks to you."

Alciel turned toward the old woman and bowed his head—

"...Mngh!"

—only to have Wurs leap up and slap him right on it, as hard as she could. She stuck her chest out in apparent rage as everyone gasped at her.

"Don't just casually bow your head down to *me*, you fool."

Alciel looked completely lost. Wurs continued.

"You're the top dog in the 'nation' they call the demon realms, ain't you? You

tryin' to put your own people under the command of humans?!"

"...No."

"Well, if you don't want demons classified as inferior to humans, don't you ever bow your head to one after making a request like *that*. That's for *servants* to do. And tell that spaced-out Devil King kid the same thing for me."

If she was already griping at Alciel about things like this, it seemed fair to conclude she had accepted his request. And now that she had, there was no doubt she'd worry over the fate of the demons as if they were her own people.

"I understand."

Thus Alciel bowed to this kindness...if only in his own mind.

"Hmph. By *that* slack-jawed look, I wonder how much you *do* understand. Okay, *now*, you with the claws! You're coming, aren't you? Tell me your name!"

"...It is Farfarello. Thanks for— *Bpph!*"

"Quit with the fake dignity! Show some respect! Bow yourself down until the sand's scrapin' the skin off of that stupidly long head of yours! You stop being polite with other nations, it's the same thing as rubbing dirt on the face of your boss here! Come on! Farfarello, right? How much of a tongue twister does your name have to *be*, anyway?!"

Farfarello scowled at this treatment for a moment, but quickly recovered. "...I look forward to serving you, ma'am."

His tone now suitably polite for Wurs's taste, he took the extra step of manifesting the demonic force inside him, extracting it from his body and turning himself human in appearance. He would've wound up nude without the customary Malebranche loincloth, but in a moment, he was a slender man with combed-down hair.

"Very good. Now, once Farlo here has some decent clothes on, we're headin' back to Phiyenci. You just *try* showing up at the Goat Pasture lookin' like that. You'd freeze within the hour!"



Once Farfarello told the complete story of Ashiya and Suzuno, Emerald and

Rumack, Albert and Wurs, and the rest of the news from Ente Isla, the group assembled in Room 201 of Villa Rosa Sasazuka stood there silently for a few moments. Chiho, hearing how Farfarello had used Emeralda's phone to contact them from the Northern Island capital of Phiyenci, began to feel a little dizzy.

"...And so I am charged with being a broker of people and information from here in Phiyenci."

Farfarello's explanation, heard through the speaker phone, was more of a surprise than Emi, Chiho, and especially Urushihara could withstand. Demons, from the demon realms, were being sent to live in human nations. How did Maou and Ashiya carry out such a massive plan between just the two of them? And even more astoundingly, they had made encouraging contacts with the empire of Efzahan, the Wurs tribe of Phiyenci, and the leader of Vashrahma—and that might be just the beginning. Even if Maou and Ashiya *did* stand at the peak of all demondom, there was no way acting so unilaterally was a smart thing to do.

Emi turned around to find a small, composed black chicken sitting there.

"Yes, I was aware of their plans," replied Camio as he nervously gauged Emi's reaction.

"....."

But after a moment of tension, Emi lightly sighed.

"Yeah. I figured you had to be involved. It'd be weird otherwise."

"Indeed. Not that I was involved with any of the actual work. The Devil King's Army may have fallen, but our realms are still filled with our people, and we are not talking about a complete transfer of the population. My *peep* role was to summarize my liege and Alciel's plans and push them along from the demon realms' side. Thus, I am clueless as to what *peep* Farfarello or anyone else might be doing now."

"...Dude, isn't it weird that I don't know anything?"

Urushihara felt safe in complaining about this. But there was a reason to leave him out of the circle.

“Sorry about that. Ashiya proposed it to me from Ente Isla while you were in the hospital in Japan, and I decided to go with it after about ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes? But it’s going to affect your entire world...”

Chiho rolled her eyes. Maou didn’t care.

“No matter how big a deal something is, when I decide on it, it’s done in an instant. It’s easy enough for me to reconstruct the conversation. Ashiya said, ‘My liege, why not use the Eastern Island as a foothold to move the demons into Ente Isla? The Azure Emperor is eager to help us,’ and I said, ‘Oh, good idea.’ That was the first and last time we talked about it.”

“That’s *fast!*”

Even Chiho was surprised at the casualness of it all.

“Ahh, Maou’s always been like that,” Urushihara tiredly stated. “Put it in a good way, he makes decisions fast; put it in a bad way, he’s completely arbitrary.”

“It was a critical moment, remember. Emi’s and Alas Ramus’s lives were hanging in the balance. I figured we could save the details for later, but that’s generally how it shook out.”

“B-but there wasn’t any talk about holy and demonic force leaving the world at that point, was there?!”

Maou and Emi had learned the relationship between the Sephirah and the world only after they’d returned to Japan from all that chaos. Why would they talk about a huge migration to the Eastern Island then?

“There’s nothing weird about it.” Maou shook his head. “I didn’t say anything to you guys about it, but the demon realms have been facing an energy crisis for a while. Whether the invasion Emi put an end to worked or not, we already estimated that sooner or later, we wouldn’t have enough demonic force to keep everyone in our realms fed. That was just when Ashiya gained the Azure Emperor’s trust. That empire’s a multiracial state with lots of empty space and a never-ending cycle of civil wars. It’s the perfect spot for demons to set up shop in. Plus, of course, we kinda regretted what happened before, so we didn’t want to cause needless chaos and try taking over another country.”

“...What are you talking about?” Emi grumbled.

“Like they say on this planet, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. And you can ‘do’ that in lots of ways.”

She was irked at the expression on Maou’s face as he began proudly speaking in riddles. Then she realized Laila hadn’t contributed to this conversation in a while. Amane and Acieth hadn’t, either, but that was to be expected—they weren’t up on the latest situation in Ente Isla. But Laila staying mum through this entire topic was bizarre.

It didn’t take long for Laila to notice her daughter’s gaze upon her. She grew pale for a moment—then, unable to withstand her, turned her eyes away.

“...Did you know?”

“Mmuhh...”

Her mother never could tell a lie.

But as surprised as Emi was, she knew that yelling at Maou over what all this was about wouldn’t change anything. Demons moving into human countries, in any normal situation, would turn the whole world on its head. But Maou and his cohorts must have known that, and even Emi could see that this action wasn’t based on their previous, simpler goal of conquering the world. She still had no idea how that led to sending Libicocco to work in Japan, but she could pin that down once they had a full grasp of Farfarello’s report.

“Oh, right. Farlo. Is the old lady—um, I mean, is Lady Wurs nearby?”

“She’s handling business at the moment. It seems an advance force of Church knights paid her a visit, but she expressed a desire to have a nice long talk with you later, General Sasaki. I am sure she will contact you soon.”

“Okay... Well, you can call me anytime the rest of today, but can you handle that Church group all right?”

“I have called it an advance force, but she said it was really more of an expedition, mapping out an advance route for the rest of their armies, so it is none of Lady Wurs’s business at the moment. Lady Wurs has several other things to report to you, so if you don’t mind me giving you a summary...”

As Farfarello put it, while they couldn't be optimistic yet, trends indicated that Suzuno, Emerald, and Rumack had all successfully delayed the Church knight corps' plans.

"Information about General Bell's, Emerald's, and Rumack's situations has also arrived to Lady Wurs, disguised as investigations into the ice spear from the Bowman's Offering. I plan to make regular trips between the Central Continent and the Goat Pasture to keep information flowing."

"Excellent, thank you for that!"

Things weren't going to be quite as convenient as before, but obtaining a communication center nobody would suspect came as a tremendous relief.

"Okay, with that said, I want you to compare what you get with Sariel's file here and stay in contact with them."

Maou gave Laila a firm pat on the shoulder.

"Huh? Me?"

"Who else am I talking to?" Maou smiled. "You're the only one who got a close-up view of the space suit guy, and you're a better messenger than Acieth ever would be. And you're also the only person here that we don't really need on hand."

"That seems like a needlessly mean way to put it, you know! Even if we *are* talking about me..."

"Wahh! Maou and Mom, they just give me dissing in front of me!"

Maou wasn't sure where she learned that word, but either way, Acieth could tell she was being criticized.

"Look, you're friends with Wurs, too, right? You're the only one who can compare notes with her about Sariel and Gabriel, and your memories of them."

Laila had little to counter that with.

"And if you're over there, holy magic users can blend in better no matter how much flying they do, right? I wanna leave Farfarello in Phiyenci, so you go fly over there and serve as our contact point."

“Well...so be it. All right.”

With the reluctant agreement, Maou clasped his hands, proud of a job well done.

“Good. And can you take him along for me?”

He pointed a finger at Kinanna, still snoring and never moving a muscle.

“Kinanna? But weren’t we leaving him in Japan, since we’re scared of the Church picking up on his demonic force?”

“That was my intention, but over the past few days, he’s been eating less and less.”

Previously, he’d be prattling away, shouting all kinds of meaningless things as he exhausted everyone around him. But in the few days since his return from the demon realms, Kinanna hadn’t spoken much more than the occasional rumble, preferring to spend his time soaking in the sun and napping.

“We know the stone in his throat’s the Astral Gem, but if he gets so weak that he dies, I don’t know how that’ll affect us. I think it’d be healthier for him in Devil’s Castle—if we have to inject him with some demonic force if push comes to shove, we can keep any resulting damage to a minimum in there. Besides, if he grows huge and trashes my apartment again, I *really* can’t afford the repairs right now.”

His concern for Kinanna’s health wasn’t a lie, probably, but his *other* excuse was the total, unvarnished truth.

“Will you be all right alone, Laila?” Chiho gingerly asked, concerned over the alarm rapidly spreading across Laila’s face.

“I know what you mean, Chiho, but who else could we—”

“Well, how ’bout me?”

Then an unexpected candidate took the stand. It was Urushihara.

“If Kinanna’s over there, I got nothin’ to do, dude. Camio’s all better now, too.”

He was right, but nobody had really demanded his services anyway. If there

was nothing to do, they were all just fine having Urushihara do nothing.

“Hmm... A lone angel is disconcerting enough, but having *peep* Lucifer join her...”

“Are you sure Urushihara should join her?!” Chiho exclaimed.

“Stop sounding like it’d worry you more than Laila being alone!” Urushihara lashed back at the expected reactions.

“Looking through how things are in the heavens,” he sheepishly continued, “this has a lot to do with my roots, too, doesn’t it? So I just figure I oughta poke around and ask as many questions as I can. It’s not like Gabriel’s gonna tell us anything if we ask him point-blank.”

Indeed, Gabriel *might* explain matters if asked, but before he did, he’d probably start picking on Urushihara, and Urushihara knew that’d be coming, so he’d never directly ask him. No matter who was in that space suit, once they were all in heaven, Urushihara wouldn’t have time to examine his background. He had stated before that he didn’t particularly care about his past, and that was probably true at the time—but if the knowledge was available to him, he likely wanted to at least have it on hand.

“Yeah. Plus, if it’s two of you, one of you can run away if the other gets stopped somewhere.”

“I *really* don’t want that to happen,” a distressed Laila said, although she still wasn’t saying no.

“Hey, there are times when we all need to feel around for something. Things have been going a little *too* well up to now. I’d be anxious if we *didn’t* run into a few obstacles like this.”

“You sure got it good, Maou. It’s just life as usual for you, still.”

“Maybe it looks like that, but I got a lot of business to mind, too.”

Urushihara glared at Maou. “Oh? Like what?”

“It’s hard,” Maou honestly replied. “Not being able to move, just having to watch over things and wait for news; that sort of thing. It finally dawned on me lately.”

“Huh?”

“People might think they logically understand things, but unless they’re actually standing there, they really can’t get the essence of it sometimes.”

This didn’t register with Urushihara much, but that really *was* the unvarnished truth, an emotion that Maou couldn’t comprehend until a bit ago.

“Urushihara... Laila... This is for Alas Ramus’s sake. With the battle looming, we can’t afford to leave any anxieties on the table. No matter how small.”

“...All right.”

“Sure, dude. I hear you, I hear you.”

An hour later, Laila carried Kinanna’s cage with one hand and her angel’s feather pen in the other, while Urushihara used his own force to open a Gate. In another moment, they were both on their way to Wurs and Farfarello. As Maou watched them go, Emi realized that his expression was unlike any she’d ever seen from him before.

“...It’ll be all right,” said Chiho from behind the two of them. “They’ve got my ‘grandmother’ and Farlo with them. They’ll make it to Devil’s Castle just fine.”

“Yeah.” Maou nodded, not turning around. “...I’m sorry for everything.”

“I’m glad you understand now.”

They both smiled, facing away from each other.

Now Emi got it. For Maou, this entire process was one of atonement. He used to have so much confidence in his powers that he never really thought about the concept of “going back.” But in that underground lab, something happened that had finally shattered his confidence. He learned that victory, and a return trip home, weren’t so absolute after all.

And, understanding how he felt now, Emi realized something else. Looking back at the history of her own battle, nothing like *this* had ever happened before. For the very first time, she was heading into a battle where she had a place to return to afterward. A place she had to go back to, with people waiting for her.



Two days after Urushihara and Laila set off for Ente Isla, a new wind was blowing across the entrance to the MgRonald at Hatagaya Station, perhaps heralding the new fiscal year for the neighborhood.

“Uhhh...”

The unrest in Iwaki’s eyes wasn’t fully hidden, even through her glasses, as she averted her gaze from the person in front of her. But this person was large enough that even averting her eyes didn’t take him fully away from sight. Being small as she was, most adults in her circle were taller than her, but *this* person was a hefty distance away from the norm.

Not wanting the man to think she was cowering, Iwaki looked down at his résumé on the desk, trying to cheer herself on.

Boy, men from Europe really are well built...

“What?”

“N-no! Nothing!”

Perhaps her inner voice had come out of her lips after all. Iwaki looked ahead again, composing herself, but in this case, it always meant looking *up*. The expression of the man looking down at her didn’t indicate anger at all, but it still scared her.

However, Iwaki didn’t have the ease of mind to hesitate at this presence. The crewmember Kisasi trusted the most had introduced this man to help her out. She needed to continue with the interview, and she needed to be on her best manners. She stretched out, loosening her body so her voice wouldn’t go shaky on her, and began the proceedings.

“So, um, first, thank you very much for applying to MgRonald, um... Libi... cock...o?”

“Libicocco, ma’am.”

“Ah—ah, sorry.”

The man stood a full head above Kawata, himself a stout man, and also sported the muscles of a rugby player or a professional wrestler. His face made him hard to read, and his low voice reverberated in the pit of her stomach.

Having her pronunciation corrected—always a great way to make a first impression—struck terror in her heart.



“Uh, ummm, so Maou tells me you used to work under him...?”

“I am Mr. Maou’s loyal servant.”

“His loyal...servant?! H-how?!”

“What?”

“N-no! No, um, never mind. Right. So, Maou—er, Mr. Maou...” Iwaki’s struggling to properly refer to Maou was a good indication of her alarm. “Well, you seem to be very qualified in foreign languages, and, um... Lee... Livi... Libi-koko, given that you were born in Italy, I can certainly see why.”

“.....”

“Um, is that wrong?”

“...No. That is right. I am Libicocco and I come from Italy.”

“Yes, right?!”

What am I even doing?

It was proving impossible to grasp the tempo of this interview. Iwaki feared she would be physically crushed by this giant’s overbearing presence before it was over. Thus, sweating bullets inside her mind, she frantically searched for a way to open a coherent conversation with this applicant.

“I sure hope this is all right...”

Emi had repeated that many times since the fully de-demonized Libicocco came to MgRonald.

“What’s all right? And stop saying that over and over,” snapped Maou.

“Can you blame me for wanting to? And let me just say, if Iwaki is ever in any danger, I’ll...”

“I made it *very* clear to him that if he does anything to harm Iwaki in the slightest, I’ll hold all the Malebranche responsible. He’s a tough guy, but as a chieftain, he’s got a brain, too. Don’t worry.”

“The ‘tough guy’ bit is what I’m the most worried about! I just hope Iwaki doesn’t burst out of there crying.”

“She’s not a child, you know.”

“Well, I can’t just ignore it!”

Libicocco had come to Japan early this morning. It was a rather quick trip over, even though Urushihara and Laila hadn’t reached Devil’s Castle yet—they had some trouble finding a ship, and the one they’d boarded was no speedster. As Farfarello reported, Libicocco had reached the Northern Island just as Urushihara and Laila were at the halfway point of the strait between it and the Central Continent.

At first, Libicocco wasn’t too sure why he had been summoned to Japan. Even Emi, informed of this plan in advance, thought it was madness. But now he was “Libicocco Malebranche,” exchange student and someone Maou knew from previous work, and he was applying for a part-time crewmember gig at the Hatagaya Station MgRonald. They hadn’t Japan-ified his name like the other demons because, quite simply, they worried that Libicocco’s acting skills weren’t up to the task. Fortunately, non-Japanese people working hourly wage jobs in Japan was no longer a rarity at all.

Hiring Libicocco would no doubt become a milestone in the Iwaki era of the location—whether in a good or bad way, no one could tell yet, but either way, Iwaki couldn’t afford to be picky. She had shifts that desperately needed filling.

“It’ll be just fine!” Chiho chirped to the still-anxious Emi. “Libicocco talked a lot with the knights over at Devil’s Castle. He might seem a little blunt at first, but once we train him right, I’m sure he’ll work really hard!”

Seeing Chiho’s eyes sparkle as she tried to make her best effort at it made Emi laugh a little.

“...The effect’s ruined in assorted ways when *you’re* saying it, Chiho.”

“I *am* a general, you know!”

Transporting the demon realms’ denizens into a human nation on Ente Isla. It was a blockbuster of a plan, and Chiho had already accepted it. A lot of that was affected by Chiho’s knowledge of the history of the realms, and the Devil King’s Army; things not even Emi or Suzuno knew. She also instantly understood why Maou had called Libicocco into Japan to work at the MgRonald after Chiho and

all the others would leave. Emi wasn't as understanding for a while, but Chiho immediately spoke up and explained things to her.

“Maou said so right in front of us. It was a long time ago, but...”

She was recalling the time when Farfarello first took Erone to Japan. Chiho deliberately left herself in his hands, attempting to find out what the demons thought about the whole situation. Maou then appeared to rescue her and convince Farfarello of the error of his ways—and when he did, he said this:

“This country... This world, really, is full of things we can harness to save the demon realms from the mess it's currently in.”

Maou had presented him with a thousand-yen bill back then. At the time, he was already starting to think that the way to guide his people was to make the demons into another race in “human society,” one that revolved around the circulation of money.

Farfarello wasn't wholly convinced, Chiho thought. Perhaps his understanding wasn't necessary. But what changed both of their minds were the events on the Eastern Island. The reason, and the motive, might've been pessimism over the state of affairs—but in the end, Efzahan, the giant empire that ruled over the Eastern Island, had (in some small part) accepted the rule of Alciel and the Malebranche.

Maou said they had talked things over enough, but when she had asked for more detail, it turned out matters were more complicated than that. In his first meeting with the Azure Emperor, he had told her, Ashiya had decided to move this plan along on his own volition. Later given command over Efzahan's knights, he had used that power to move the empire's government, in the end quelling the disturbance with a minimum of human casualties.

He was taking advantage of the Azure Emperor's ambition to rule all of Ente Isla, yes, but he had his deal. The power of the demons would be used for the nation's sake, in exchange for a promise that Efzahan would accept the demon immigrants—and as proof of the Azure Emperor's willingness to keep that promise, he was diverting his knights to help prepare for the battle against heaven.

“No matter where they go, the one thing they need is what I said before—

that ‘when in Rome’ spirit. The drive to work, make money, and get along with that nation’s people. Ashiya, Urushihara, and I have cultivated that spirit here in Japan, and little by little, we gotta spread it around to the people under us. And I want Libicocco to be the forerunner of that.”

The definition of “get along with” would differ greatly depending on where they went. Considering the past actions of the Devil King’s Army, there would be regions that would never accept them, no matter how much the demons gave up. For example, Vashrahma and the rest of the Southern Island would never accept the Malebranche, their past invaders. But on the Northern Island, where Adramelech’s invasion was relatively accepted, there’d likely be a fair number of tribes willing to take in the Bluehorns. Borders up there were little more than political constructs; people were more grouped into their respective races or tribes, and if the demons behaved, they could be accepted as another tribe—that was the expectation anyway.

Of course, Efzahan would likely accept the greatest number of demons. It was much larger than any other nation, accepting of diverse races from the start, and the constant string of internal conflicts made it easy for foreign elements to get in. Meanwhile the Western Empire, full of single-race (or single race–dominant) nations where citizenship was a strong uniting force, would promptly show the demons the door. The spirit of the Church, based on its holy acts, had taken firm root on that island; the people’s opposition to the presence of demons ran far deeper than elsewhere.

Thus Maou and Ashiya struck the Western Empire off the list of potential choices immediately, a move he predicted the other potential choices would find pleasing. The Western Island had more nations overall than the other continents, but they sported military and manufacturing strength bound together under the common presence of the Church. The Azure Emperor immediately accepted demons in part to gain the essential framework, and the strength, to compete against the West. But the North and the South thought along similar lines, too, to be sure.

Anyone who moved in would certainly face many attacks about their former position as invaders. But to go beyond that, they needed to have a constant, thorough “when in Rome” philosophy. Don’t disgrace the people that accepted

you—it all came down to that.

To build this spirit and transmit it to the demons, three people were selected—Chiho, a normal human from another world with no fighting power; Farfarello, who proved capable of talking with her at their first meeting; and Libicocco.

“I explained to Libicocco all about the importance of that, the achievements he made and the hopes I have for him, and the way he’s holding the future of the realms and its demons on his back. The Malebranche aren’t stupid. They built a society with a long history in the demon realms, one featuring demons of different shapes and forms working together. They went from the biggest force in the realms to a part of the Devil King’s Army; they’ve got experience with respecting other people, but also figuring out how to maintain a line they’ll never give up on. So don’t worry. He’s a capable man.”

Seeing how serious Maou was, Emi surrendered.

“All right. I hear you loud and clear. But can’t he get any smaller? If he starts running around in the kitchen, he’ll get in everybody’s way.”

Libicocco already dwarfed Kawata. Having him in the not-exactly-large kitchen at Hatagaya Station was going to be an overwhelming sight. But Maou confidently raised a finger into the air.

“No problem there. Once he’s hired, I’m gonna have him get a moped license. With Kisaki leaving, we’ll have fewer delivery drivers, so I want him scooting around outside all day.”

“...*That’s* worrying, too.”

When she and Maou first reunited, Emi was afraid to take her eyes off him and Villa Rosa Sasazuka for a single moment. Concern over leaving Libicocco to himself in the outside world and causing problems welled into her head.

Maou nodded at this. “If something happens,” he stated firmly, “I’ll take care of it. So both of you lend me a hand here, okay? Keep an eye out for him.”

“Maou?”

“I’d like...to believe in him, but...”

Emi wasn't comfortable giving this her nod. Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara had her trust, but that was because they were Maou, Ashiya, and Urushihara. Giving that to a demon who had literally showed up in Japan *today* didn't seem right to her.

But just as she was about to voice these concerns:

"Okay, well, um... For now, there isn't a uniform in inventory here that he can wear, so until we can order one..."

"...All right."

From the staff room emerged Iwaki, looking slightly dizzy as she talked with Libicocco next to him. "I'm thinking a double XL ought to work," she said. "Um, also, I know your living situation so I'm not gonna force you, but if you could get yourself your own phone that we could get in touch with..."

"...Do I need one?" Libicocco asked.

"Oh, no, no, no, no! Not at all! We can certainly go through Mr. Maou as well! But, you know, uh, I just think things would be a bit more convenient that way, so, ah, you don't *need* to or anything!"

"...I will discuss the matter and get one soon, then."

"Y-y-you will?! Th-thank you! B-but don't kill yourself over it, all right?!"

""What just happened?""

Emi and Chiho burst out in unison at the unnatural conversation. Soon, the manager and the interviewee were at the counter with them.

"Uh, um, Mr. Maou?"

"What is it, Manager? Um, no 'Mr.' is needed, so..."

Maou shot a glance at Libicocco, having no idea where this came from. The demon closed his eyes and slightly shook his head.

"Ah. Um. Maou. I, he, I decided to hire your friend, so..."

"Huh?!" This reaction from Emi, thankfully, fell on deaf ears.

"It's just, um, we don't have a uniform for him, so I'll need to make an order, and after that, maybe Monday, I'd like to talk about shifts and stuff with him.

Also, um, his contact info all leads to you, Mr. Maou, um, I mean, Maou...”

“All right. That’s kinda inconvenient, isn’t it? Let’s go buy you a phone soon, Libicocco.”

“...Very well.”

“R-right, yes, that’d be a *big* help to me! And, uh, about the moped license, the company will help pay for the costs, so there’s no need to worry about that, so, um, I’ll talk to you soon! About the shifts!”

“...I understand. Thank you very much.”

Libicocco bent his back downward, lowering his head.

“*Eeep!* N-no, um, thank *you*...”

His head was blocking the ceiling light, making Iwaki think Libicocco’s enormous body was about to tumble down upon her. She flinched a little.

“He’s a little blunt, but he’s really an honest, down-to-earth guy. I think he’ll take to training just fine. You know the way home, right?”

“I do. In that case, excuse me.”

Bowing once more to everyone there, Libicocco silently left.

“Thanks very much for this, Manager. Taking time for an interview and everything...”

“N-no, no, I wasn’t expecting you to bring in someone so quickly...um. I appreciate it. His Japanese seems fine, and...um...honestly, he looks kind of scary, but...”

That comment was a little *too* honest for its own good, but look at it from another angle and it showed that Iwaki’s interview with Libicocco went without any major hitches. Chiho tapped Emi on the arm and gave her a wink, Emi replying with a defeated nod. For now, at least, Libicocco had a drive to master life in Japan, just as Maou said.

“He’s kind of new to Japan, so he’s still pretty, you know, *stiff* with the language. I’ll train him in smiling and other customer service stuff at home.”

Iwaki shook her head at Maou. “No, no, that can wait until he’s used to life in

Japan first. He needs practice, experiencing what to do when this or that happens, or else I think he'll get all mixed up. Judging by his Japanese, maybe he learned a few case studies like that at school or in his home country, but things are always subtly different in real life, you know?"

Considering how terrified she was of him, Iwaki sounded pretty firm and flexible about his future. Maou smiled gratefully and bowed a little.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. But all right. Thanks again."

"Thank *you*. Hmm... But what will we do if the 2X size isn't big enough? Oh, right, and his name tag! Li, Libi... Hmm. Kind of hard to pronounce. Maou, his name tag has to be written in katakana, but how should I render his name?"

"Oh, yeah, good point. How *should* we? If we put his first and last name on, the text would be too scrunched up to read."

Watching Iwaki and Maou banter, Chiho smiled.

"It might be way too small a step, but hopefully this helps demons gradually find a place for themselves among people."

"Yeah... Maybe." Emi's response was strained.

"Right." Chiho didn't need to ask why. She knew full well, but she wanted to just keep it at that. To her, there was a line that needed to be drawn, and she wanted herself and Emi standing on the same side. And Emi fully understood that, too.

So that was why...

"So who's going to be Libicocco's trainer?" Emi asked.

"It probably shouldn't be me, for his sake," Maou said. "I bet Iwaki's gonna say the same thing, too."

It was ten in the evening and Emi was already changed and at the café counter, her shift coinciding with Chiho's so she could bring her home.

Taking out her smartphone, she looked at the clock, then pointed at the counter.

"Let me have a large latte. I don't need the employee discount."



“Oh?”

“I’ll pay you the money.”

“.....”

If a customer, whether an employee or the Hero, had the money, it was Maou’s job to make her order.

“Can you leave once Chi’s done changing?” he said as he delivered the cup.

“I’ll drink this really quick.”

Emi produced a thousand-yen bill, receiving 660 yen in change from it. In Japan, this is paid out in four neat coins—one 500-yen, one 100-yen, one 50-yen, and one 10-yen. She looked at the coins in her hand, scowling at them, then accepted the latte from Maou’s hand and sighed.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just thought, you know, this is the simplest thing, but...”

“Hmm?”

“Never mind.” Putting the coins in her bag, Emi brought the cup up to her lips right there.

“Dude, take a seat. Someone might show up...”

“If they do, I’ll go.”

“...If you wanna say something, say it. When you’re moping around me like this, it usually means you’re irritated about something stupid.”

“If you know that, then shut up and let me rant a little.”

“I’m not interested in being your sandbag,” Maou said as he cleaned the latte powder and filter and returned the milk to the fridge.

“It was a surprise, though, wasn’t it? Ms. Kisaki never told us the results of an interview right there.”

“It’s not that weird, is it? His contact number is my phone for the time being, so if she called him, I would’ve found out that way anyway. Besides, we’re gonna be so short on staff, we can’t really be choosy.”

“Right, yeah. I can’t believe five people are leaving.”

“Well, no way I can fill up five posts with demons, but if we’re opening holes in the schedule thanks to our personal stuff, nobody’s gonna complain if I help cover them.”

“I pity the rest of the staff who has to deal with him.”

“It’s for the sake of all our futures, in a roundabout kinda way. What do you mean, you pity them?”

“Oh, is it? Yeah. I’m sorry. That was going too far. It’s gotta happen, huh?”

“I can see if you’re conflicted about it and stuff, but once he’s on staff, you mind relenting a bit and working with him? The way a veteran crewmember should?”

“All right, all right. I had a dedicated veteran crewmember train *me*, after all, so I’ll try to learn from that. I *never* bring my personal issues to work.”

“Look...”

“Thanks for the latte. It was a little bitter for my taste.”

Emi had been diligently sipping on the large latte for all of that short conversation. Maou accepted her empty cup, despite the disgusted look on his face.

Just then, they heard Chiho wishing her good-byes to the staff downstairs. Emi stopped leaning on the counter, lightly waving and turning away from Maou.

“Hey, Devil King?”

“Huh?”

“If this demon migration plan of yours turns out okay...”

“Uh-huh?”

Her back was still turned, her hands still in the pockets of her spring coat, and her voice reminded Maou of the more authoritarian tone of a long-ago Emi.

She turned back toward him. “Where are you gonna keep being king?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re gonna join Ms. Kisaki’s firm, aren’t you? In three years?”

“Yeah.”

“And when that comes...”

Emi’s voice seemed ever-so-slightly shaky to Maou, and he knew he wasn’t imagining it. So why was it shaking? Not even Emi knew, likely.

“When that time comes...what will you be?”

Once the people he ruled over joined the human world, what would happen to the King of All Demons?

“I think you’ve got the wrong idea about that, so lemme say this first.” Maou started cleaning the utensils he doubted would be used again tonight. “I’m not just gonna scoop up every single demon and plop them in Ente Isla. There’ll be a decent number left in the demon realms.”

“...There will? But if all the demonic force is gone, there’s nothing else to eat or drink in there...”

“It’s not completely barren. We just never tried searching for or cultivating anything since we didn’t need it. We *will*, though. The migration’s a major step, but for those who don’t want to leave the realms, we still got a lotta stuff left to do. Plus...”

Maou looked up as he rinsed the soap lather off his hands.

“Like the Japanese expression goes, ‘Talk about next year and the devil will laugh.’ How the hell am I gonna know about *three* years from now?”

“You’re a grown man. You could try to make some plans. What’re you gonna be in three years?”

“Three years ago, did you imagine in the slightest that you’d be working at the same place I am?”

“...No.”

Admitting that put her in a weak position. A *very* weak one.

“Right? That sort of thing. Whatever happens, happens. So quit worrying

about it. I'm gonna try my best not to piss you off."

"Don't 'try your best.' Just *do* it."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's impossible for me not to piss you off. I've already got my hands full trying to play nice with you."

"How nice of you to say," she spat out with a smile. "I'm already getting a little irritated."

She wasn't expecting to hear anything honest from him tonight. Still, though, she felt her mind had cleared a little.

"Yusa! Sorry I'm late! I dropped my change purse in my locker, and there were coins all over the... Oh?"

Chiho had run halfway up the stairs to find Emi standing awkwardly in the middle of the café space. It puzzled her.

"Oh. No problem. Ready to go?"

But Emi whirled over and began slowly trudging down the stairs.

"Um, sure. Have a good night, Maou!"

Still confused, Chiho followed Emi's lead, waving brightly to Maou before leaving. He could faintly hear the automatic doors opening and closing, and then his hands stopped.

"What will I be in three years...?"

Emi didn't need to remind him. He had thought about it many times over. It was on his mind ever since he learned that Ashiya and the Azure Emperor were considering a transfer of demons to Ente Isla during the Eastern Island strife, at a location far away from him.

"I said it was crazy... How pathetic. Who could've ever imagined *this* happening back a year ago...? How am I supposed to know about three years on?"

Memories, bitter but still making him smile, flashed across his mind.

"I'll need to find a new life, huh?"

Maou grinned at the empty MgRonald upstairs space.

“What will I be in three years? I’m not sure that’s up to me to decide.”

“What are you muttering about up there?”

Suddenly, another familiar figure emerged from the stairs Emi and Chiho descended.

“Ms. Kisaki?”

“You’re still on duty.”

“Sorry. I was just musing a little about my future.”

Kisaki was in a business suit instead of a floor uniform. “I heard from Iwaki you already found a new hire with potential.”

“Oh, it was all luck. The timing just happened to work out right. We’ll have to see how much potential he has.”

“But I still appreciate it. It’s a good opportunity, in a way. It’s good for her to be training more crewmembers of her own.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I worked with the guy before, but I’ll make sure we don’t wind up creating weird cliques within the staff, so...”

“Well, don’t think about it too much, or else it’ll have the opposite effect. Just keep it natural. If everyone tries to look out for each other on the job, things will work out like they were meant to be... Of course, *I’m* starting to resent the relationships I need to build in my new department already, so maybe I’m hopeless. Oh, and Marko?”

“Yes?”

“I’ll take a Blend, regular size.”

“...Right away.”

Maou straightened himself up, then used the tools and beans he had spent the last day keeping in prime condition as a McGonald Barista to produce a Blend Coffee, the first item on top of the menu. Pouring a regular-size quantity into a cup, he placed it on a saucer and tray and presented it to Kisaki.

“Would you like milk or sugar?”

“No thanks. I’ll take it black.”

Accepting the tray, Kisaki sat down at the table nearest to the counter and took a sip. Five seconds of nervous tension ensued.

“Not bad.”

A passing grade. She didn’t say it was good, but Kisaki took another satisfied sip before looking at Maou.

“Neither of us knows what’s ahead, but when I say something, I always go through with it. I’ll be waiting for a good reply in three years.”

“And I hope you’ll make me want to give you a good one.”

“Oh, *there* you go.” Kisaki shut her eyes, taking in the joke, and placed her cup on the saucer. “This location’s all yours now.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep it going.”

There was no need for much else by now. If there was, that need would come in three years. Both Maou and Kisaki understood that well—but tomorrow, Kisaki would be leaving for good. She turned down Akiko’s going-away party, saying she’d speak to everyone individually instead—and this was how she wanted to thank, and wish well for, Maou.

“Working with you made me a happy woman.”



Three days later:

“Now listen! As a rule, when you hear the automatic doors open, you can’t go wrong saying ‘Welcome!’”

“...Yes.”

“Try to make eye contact as much as you can with little kids, okay? Up to around age eight! The kid earlier looked a little scared, so try to bend down a little and speak softly and slowly to him!”

“...Yes.”

“Okay, let’s start wiping up some trays! The alcohol disinfectant is right here, so give each tray a quick squirt on both sides, then wipe it down with this disinfected washcloth. If you run out of spray, we have more on the shelf by the

service entrance...”

“.....Yes.”

“Well, good. Things seem to be going nicely, then.”

“Um, yes...”

A ways behind the counter, Iwaki gently smiled at the sight of the giant figure wiping trays with the much smaller one next to him. Emi gave it more of a distressed smirk.

It was the first official day of work for Libicocco. Kawata was assigned training duty for him, but he was out on a delivery for now, so Chiho was teaching him some of the simpler jobs. At another time, Libicocco had been fond of calling her a “little ant,” but now:

“Ms. Sasaki... This tray just snapped, but...”

“Y-you’re putting too much force into it! How did you break something this solid?!”

“...Sorry.”

Now Chiho was learning how to be a leader.

“I don’t know if Libicocco brought some luck in with him, but I have two interviews scheduled for today. I’ll consider them carefully, of course, but I’m starting to hold out a little hope.”

“Oh... That’s good.”

Emi just nodded, not wanting to shoot down the elated Iwaki. The manager had apparently been practicing her pronunciation of “Libicocco,” but the sound of that name coming from Iwaki’s lips made every fiber of the battle-forged Emi tense up.

They both got back to work, Emi trying to convince herself to loosen up a little, just as a pair of new customers came in. Chiho looked up.

“Welcome!”

“.....”

“Libicocco?”

“...Ah, w-welcome!”

Libicocco failed to react quite as fast as Chiho.

“Doing all these things, I’m impressed you could hear such a soft sound...”

“You’ll gain an ear for it eventually... Okay, we’re ready to help you at—oh!”

Chiho was about to man the register when she realized she knew this couple.

“Kao! Kohmura! Welcome!”

“Hey, Sasachi.”

“Yo.”

It was Kaori and Yoshiya.

“What’re you up to today?”

“I’m back from the test prep center, but Shoji was all, like, ‘Hey, let’s pop in!’”

“Kao said that?” Chiho looked at Kaori, who gave her a harried smile.

“Well, like, we’re all in our last year of high school now, right? I figured we wouldn’t have a chance to see you in a work uni for much longer, so, you know...”

She sounded a bit awkward about it, but Chiho nodded, not suspecting anything deep.

“I can’t hide it from you, huh, Kao?”

“Hmm?”

“I’ll go visit your table if I have some time later. For now, can I take your order?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Right. I got a coupon.”

“All right, thank you very much. If you could put that up to the scanner there...”

Chiho rapidly took the order.

“Right, I’ll have you wait over here a moment, please... Libicocco! I’ll need a

salad from that fridge over there. Can you fill a large cup with ice for me, too?"

"...Yes."

Libicocco deftly carried out the commands.

"...Ms. Sasaki, do we have enough potatoes?"

"That works. It's just one small order for this one. Actually, watch as I do this. We use this shovel here, and you can open up the top of the fry bag and slip it on the bottom like this."

"...That looks hard. The paper's pretty soft."

"You'll need some practice to learn how many fries go in each size, so try to pick that up as you do it. Oh, here's the burger. Read the order slip and make sure you put it on the correct tray. Can you read kanji? Let me know if you don't understand anything."

"...Yes. I can read this."

It was only with difficulty at first, but Libicocco successfully set up Kaori's and Yoshiya's orders.

"...And here you are."

"Thanks!"

Kaori and Yoshiya were a tad awed by Libicocco's size, but still gracefully accepted the trays and sat at a free table. Libicocco, watching them, let out a small sigh.

"I think I'm getting dizzy."

"Yeah, it's hard at first. I felt the same way."

"No. It's not about getting used to the work. The fact humans eat all these different things for a meal just repulses me."

"Well, McRonald has a pretty restricted menu, if anything. I'm sure there's an even bigger variety to sample in Ente Isla."

"....." Libicocco had no response. There was no denying what Chiho had said.

"I'm going to leave for a moment. I'll be back if a customer shows up, so

practice your ‘Welcome!’ for now, okay?”

“...All right.”

Waiting until the work and customers had died down a notch, Chiho left the counter and went up to Kaori and Yoshida’s table. Kaori looked up, expecting her. She couldn’t leave Libicocco alone for long, so Chiho cut to the chase.

“Well, you’re right, Kao. I’m quitting my job this month.”

“Ahh, I thought so.”

“Aw, too bad. What’re you gonna do with the free time? Go to test prep?”

“I haven’t decided on one yet, but I imagine I will, yeah. I’m not really in a position to study alone right now.”

“Ohh?”

Kaori let that slide, but to Chiho, it was the honest truth. If she quit her job with no other structure behind it, she’d be so preoccupied with Maou and the rest that she wouldn’t be able to focus on college exams. Remain idle for too long, and she’d no doubt start thinking about how she could help Maou—and they, in turn, might see her as an “unsung hero” to call upon.

This time, though, that couldn’t happen. Both sides needed to handle the work in front of them—*then* they could cooperate on what they could. And the job ahead for Chiho wasn’t delivering meals to the famished Maou.

She needed to make every effort right now to mature into someone who really *could* help them, if—at some point in the future—something crazy happened and he finally accepted her feelings. Once they were done with their great task, if she wanted to be someone who could stand proud with Maou and everyone, Chiho had to powerfully fulfill her duty in her last year of high school, both internally and externally.

“Of course, if there’s something else only I can do apart from studying, I’ll wanna do that, too, but...”

“I dunno what you mean by that, but if you cleared the fog a little bit, then great for you.”

“Did I look that fogged up?”

“You thought you could hide it from me?”

“No. Sorry.”

There was no beating Kaori. Chiho chuckled and stuck out her tongue.

“So is that big guy really newer here than you? I can’t believe it.”

Kaori all but announced the end of that topic as she began a new one. Chiho nodded.

“He’s the newest one, yeah. His trainer’s out right now, so I’m teaching him a few things.”

“Ohh... I feel like you were tellin’ us about *your* training not too long ago. Wow. You’re teaching an older dude like that?”

Come to think of it, Kaori and Yoshiya saw Chiho back when she was brand new in here. Thinking back to then embarrassed her a little, but it was still a good memory.

“He’s actually pretty young, so don’t call him an ‘older guy’ quite yet—oh, welcome!”

She heard the door open, causing her to reflexively turn around and smile. This time, however, Libicocco picked up on the sound first.

“WWELLLLcommme!!”

A low baritone vibrated across the room, grabbing the attention of everyone inside. Chiho, Kaori, and Yoshiya all flinched backward, before Chiho gave them a wave and hurried over to the counter. Even Iwaki and Emi were out from the kitchen to see what was up.

“W-welcome, sir! I’ll take you over here!”

Libicocco couldn’t man the register on his first day, so Emi took his place while Chiho offered him a few words of caution.

“Libicocco, I know I said to be loud with it, but I didn’t ask you to *roar* it out! Listen to the crewmembers around you and try to copy them! It’s no good if you’re too loud.”

“...Tch. What a pain...”

He made sure only Chiho could hear him complain. His trouble carrying out the instructions given to him was starting to irritate him.

Realizing Emi had an ear pointed at her as she dealt with the customer, Chiho decided at that moment to break out a hidden move she had stored up. Bringing a hand to her waist, she barked out her orders, like the teacher she was.

“Ilwacol tuka ilwabolg nitze, Libicocco.” (When in Rome, do as the Romans do, Libicocco.)

“!”

“?! ”

Libicocco was surprised, of course. So was Emi, who stopped at the register long enough to shoot Chiho a look. She had just spoken a phrase of Centurient, the central trading language spoken in Ente Isla.

The night Farfarello had contacted them, Dhin Dhem Wurs herself placed a call, as if she were Chiho’s granny from the mountains. They had a long talk, and as the topic turned to welcoming demon settlers to her land, a thought occurred to Chiho: How would you translate the “when in Rome” expression into Ente Isla’s language? Wurs taught her, using the Centurient that Adramelech spoke. Being Wurs, she then offered to give Chiho the best teacher she knew if she wanted to become fluent. It took a while for Chiho to fend her off, but judging by Libicocco’s reaction, asking was a great idea.

As the demon stood dumbfounded by the confidently spoken Centurient, Chiho continued in Japanese.

“Your leader and Alciel have gotten this far because they took that advice to heart. If you start complaining about *this* much, they’d laugh their heads off at you.”

Libicocco was weak against references to Maou and Ashiya. He coughed, averting his eyes and looking generally ashamed.

“...I know. Ugh... Ngh, *welcome!*”

“Good! Keep it up!”

Chiho slapped him on the back as he uncomfortably returned to work. Emi looked like she had a question or two for Chiho, but things were too busy at the moment, so she gave up and got back to her own post. Iwaki had been watching the two of them, but seeing Libicocco meekly follow Chiho's instructions relieved her enough that she slipped back without comment.

"She really *does* look like all her troubles are gone."

Kaori gave Chiho a satisfied nod as she watched her from afar. She really *had* changed since she started working here. Her anxiety when she began here last April, after not being sure where to go next in life, was nowhere to be found. No matter what trouble she had, no matter how hard it got, Chiho was never going to stop or hesitate as she kept moving forward. The sight of her dealing with that large new guy reassured Kaori about "Chiho Sasaki" as a person, not just a friend.

"I better get myself together, too."

"Me too..."

"Hmm? What's up, Yoshiya? You look troubled."

"Nah, I mean, Sasaki totally just spoke to him in a foreign language, didn't she? Like, a year ago, she had her hands full keeping up with the seniors in the *kyudo* club. Does having a job really do all that for you? Oh, man, I thought I was so cool for going to test prep, but forget it. No way I could achieve *that* in a year."

"You don't really need to. But if she inspires you to try harder, then great. Maybe we could talk with Sasachi about all going to the same college again?"

"...You're already hard enough on me, Shoji. If I go with Sasaki, too, it'll be even worse."

"C'mon, show me some guts! Don't give up the fight before you even start!"

Chiho's finishing move was proving to be effective in unpredictable ways.

Mayumi Kisaki was leaving, as was a small crowd of part-timers—and Chiho was about to join them. Now, in the midst of this, Libicocco was proving to be quite literally a giant new presence. How would he impact the location? Emi

couldn't even imagine. But as she saw him and Chiho together, she had resolved on something big in her mind.

As shown by the tray he'd snapped a bit ago, Libicocco wasn't as deft at controlling his human body as Maou, Ashiya, Urushihara, or fellow Malebranche Farfarello. Urushihara mentioned that the Malebranche had a lot more dexterity than one would think, but being in a human body meant learning a few things over again, perhaps. Whether he meant it or not, all that power could cause trouble, in one way or the other.

So:

“...We gotta get back alive.”

That was one more reason why they couldn't afford to lose the battle against heaven. The McDonald near Hatagaya Station was going to remain a cherished place to herself, to Chiho, to Maou, to Kisaki, and to Iwaki and Libicocco, too. As long as Chiho was able, she wanted to watch over it—for the important people, and the important things, in her life; for all of her friends trying their hardest in Ente Isla right now.

“Also...let's try to wrap this up ASAP, so I can get some shifts in July, too...”

That was her resolve, and it resonated deep within her.

EXTRA CHAPTER: THE FALLEN ANGEL RECALLS

“A lot of hubbub around town, isn’t there?”

“To me, anyplace with a lot of people is just a big blur of noise.”

“There’s a steady stream of goods flowing in from the West. A great deal of powerful tribes and regional leaders, not only Lady Wurs, have turned their attention to Noza Quartus—and to this town, Welland Isa.”

“Mmmngh...zzz...”

After having inadvertently crossed paths with Libicocco in Ente Isla, Urushihara, Laila, and Kinanna were in the port city of Welland Isa, on the southern tip of the Northern Island.

The scope of this city was twice that of the Goat Pasture, and as the name indicated, it was within the territory of the Welland tribe. It was the largest port on the Northern Island, and since the Welland territory was one of the few broad, flat tracts of land on the island, many people and things moved through it.

They were in a private room on the second floor of a restaurant in a relatively posh part of town, the sea breeze from the port providing a pleasant atmosphere. Farfarello, in human form and dressed in oddly elegant clothing, had guided them here for a meal, and their table offered a splendid view of the port.

“I thought we’d be going straight to the Goat Pasture, but from here, maybe it won’t take much time to reach Devil’s Castle after all.”

“Sadly, that will not be the case.”

Urushihara’s observation would be true in regular times, but Farfarello—in traditional Northern gear he’d borrowed from one tribe or another, but still managing to look stuffily formal in it—furrowed his brows.

“An advance force of Church knights has already arrived here in Welland Isa.”

“Huh? Are we all right, then?”

Laila seemed surprised, but Farfarello waved a hand to calm her. “This is the hundred-man force I mentioned to you earlier. They are surveying the land, working out a path for their larger armies to traverse.”

“Ohh? What would *they* be doin’ in Noza Quartus? I figured they’d be hitting the Central Continent via Wezu.”

“Wezu Quartus is reportedly unable to house a large-scale force of Church knights. It has not recovered, it seems, from the blow you landed upon it, Lord Lucifer.”

“Farfarello, can you tell the Devil King and Alciel that next time you see them? Tell ‘em it was all me, dude—like, my hard work back then is still workin’ for them. Okay? It’s important.”

“Um, yes...”

The sudden push from Urushihara surprised Farfarello as he broke into a summary of Emeraldalda and Rumack’s activity, as related to him from Wurs.

“So the Church knights are forced to rely on the Northern Island for their supply lines, even if they know it’ll hold up their goods?”

“That traffic will clear up, however, the more time we give them. Emeraldalda Etuva and Lady Wurs are taking measures to ensure it won’t be that simple, she told me, but...”

“Hmm. I can’t say what she’s doing,” Laila absentmindedly stated, “but Lidem sure is something else.”

“Laila, what you just said sounds incredibly stupid.”

The stupefied Urushihara sat up, turning toward the port.

“Is it that ship? I’m seeing the flags of the Church and Kierence hoisted up. That’s the nation that owns Lamoise. If a Lamoise ship is all the way up here, the shipping lines must be pretty damn clogged, yeah.”

His attention was focused on a single battleship on one end of the port,

currently under guard.

“But it doesn’t look like anybody’s at work on it. It’s there to menace people. Like, they’re just pretending to work, huh, Farfarello?”

“Yes.”

“And negotiations between Dhin Dhem Wurs and the Church knights can’t be going well, right?”

“Indeed not, my lord,” Farfarello said with a grin. “I believe I know a thing or two about the human world, but politics do remain a difficult topic for me.”

“Wow, Lucifer. You can tell all of that from here?”

Laila was impressed. One view of a battleship seemed to tell Urushihara everything he needed.

“When it comes to ‘not working,’ dude, I’m an expert in every way.”

She wondered whether she should be impressed or revolted by that.

“It’s got no escorts,” he reluctantly continued, sensing her expression. “Nothing out at sea, nothing in the port, nothing among the other ships out there. If they’re operating such a fancy ship alone when time’s of the essence and all, that shows how involved the Church is with the Northern Island. They realized they can’t just muscle their way through by force. But if the ship itself is lightly guarded, there can’t be anyone *that* important on board. They brought someone decently high up along, but I’m guessing it was such a mismatch that he got chased right back in there.”

“Indeed. Lady Wurs has no interest in negotiating with the advance force. A more important individual will be replacing their leader shortly.”

Laila’s eyes opened wide at the demons’ exchange. Urushihara responded with a light chuckle.

“Y’know, dude, we all think this, but it’s amazing you actually managed to avoid getting caught by heaven all this time.”

“I—I didn’t have much choice.”

Laila had been the target of so much shade from so many sources as of late

that her lack of knowledge and planning was starting to shame her.

“I was only a doctor to start with, you know. And I was on the low end of our research, just following Ignora’s orders. I had nothing to do with politics at all.”

“And that’s why I’m shocked you’re alive today. Even though there’s a whole time period that’s a total blank for me.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Farfarello, there’s really no need to stick with us. You oughta stay on the Northern Island. We can reach the Central Continent by ourselves.”

“What? Lucifer?”

“Huh? But Dhin Dhem told him to accompany us on the round trip to and from Noza Quartus...”

“If they knew about this, Maou and Ashiya would probably make the same choice. I headed up the Western invasion force, y’know. I tangled with Olba for quite a while, and I’d like to think I know how the Church thinks.”

Urushihara raised his hand and made a cutting motion with it against his neck.

“The Church has tons of heads to replace the ones they chop off. Dhin Dhem Wurs doesn’t. Right now, she’s the top line of defense for our plan. If anything happens to her, with the zirga all messed up, they won’t have anyone to unite the Northern Island under. The island’ll split apart, and that’ll make things *real* bad for us.”

“Are you saying the Church is going to assassinate Lidem?!”

Laila almost shrieked it out. Urushihara shook his head.

“I don’t think they’ll try anything that extreme, or that obvious. But depending on who this ‘important individual’ is, I dunno how optimistic we can be. I can think of a lot of ways to keep Wurs from interfering with the Central Continent and the Church knights. Like, if the old lady doesn’t get anything out of supporting us any longer, there’s no telling when she might flip on us. I dunno what kinda deal Ashiya worked out with Wurs, but we need a situation where she can’t betray us, and we need it to last as long as possible... What, dude?”

Laila and Farfarello stared at him in astonishment. The validity of his expert analysis and observations was a shock.

“...Look, if nobody else is around to do it for me, even I can think this much if I have to, okay?!”

Having made that clear, he pouted and turned his back to them.

“Hey, you all right?”

Laila began to panic at the sight of Urushihara lying spread-eagle on the floor of their cabin, completely inert.

Dhin Dhem Wurs had organized a berth for them on a cargo ship going from Welland Isa to Noza Quartus, but Urushihara had looked unwell even before he'd boarded the ship. Boats in Ente Isla were powered by wind, the old-fashioned way. This made schedules a tricky thing to keep, and since ships were more directly battered by the waves, the below-deck caverns reeled up and down fiercely.

There were some so-called magic ships, owned by militaries or the superrich, which could plow their way through storms or calm seas. But a nation was lucky to claim even one of these, and sadly, all Wurz could find was this regular old boat. Out of consideration for Kinanna, she had managed to find a private room for them, along the Welland-Noza route, when the current unprecedented boom in shipping made every voyage packed to the gills. They needed to thank her for that, but...

“I want to fly...somewhere far...far away...”

He was seasick, of course. Normal people could wage air battles that'd normally rip them apart and survive without issue, but Urushihara was simply a mess inside a moving vehicle. Neither Maou, nor Ashiya, Emi, or Suzuno was similarly afflicted, so it must've been a Urushihara-specific problem.

“I had no idea you'd be seasick... Whoever heard of a demon who got seasick?”

“.....”

He lacked the energy to respond.

“Are you okay on other vehicles?”

“.....Long car trips, I couldn’t deal with. Trains, I can ride all day.”

“That’s pretty typical. You must just be prone to that. Why don’t you at least try sleeping in a hammock? Doesn’t it hurt to be on the floor?”

They had a private room, but this was still a cargo ship. There was nothing as luxurious as a bed in here; just two hammocks hung from rings that looked like they’d be torn off the wall by all the undulating.

“I climb in one of those, dude, I’m seriously gonna die. On the floor, at least, I can keep in place.”

“Is that how it works?”

In tranquil seas, a hammock used the laws of physics to keep you as level as possible. But the swaying feeling wasn’t the only cause of seasickness. There was the difference between what was seen and what was felt, or strong light, or odors, or the unconscious pressure felt in an enclosed space. Many things. So if the afflicted patient here said he was best on the floor, it was a good idea not to move him.

“Lidem and Farlo gave us these box lunches. They’ll go bad if we don’t eat them today.”

“Don’t talk about food, dude...”

“So can I give yours to Kinanna?”

“...Fine. Uuungh...”

On the edge of his vision, he could see Laila open Kinanna’s cage and offer him something resembling a sandwich. Kinanna sniffed at it, then crept up and began eating it like any other lizard out there.

“.....”

The tornado that had ripped apart Room 201 seemed like an illusion now. Kinanna, the monster from deep under the demon realms, now looked bereft of life. They were starting to worry the sea journey would sap his energy even further. He hardly talked any longer, and even back in a land of magic like Ente Isla, there was no sign of his body growing at all.

If he should die, what would happen to the Astral Gem?

“Erff...”

Nausea clouded Urushihara’s mind. He hadn’t felt this sick to his stomach in ages. Even the trip in the Sasaki family car up to Nagano wasn’t nearly as bad as this. His head and chest were killing him, but he couldn’t throw anything up.

“Errrgh...dammit...”

Lying on the floor like this, he could feel the shuddering of every wave the ship cut through. The hull creaked, a terrible din from nowhere in particular that surrounded him. It was a tiny, lightless room, with no way of seeing outside. He hated everything about it. Why couldn’t he go outside? There was no reason for him to be cooped up in this deep, dark, cramped pit of a room.

“Lucifer?”

“.....”

“Hey! Lucifer? Hanging in there?”

“.....Don’t shake me. I’m gonna hurl.”

“Whoa!”

The moment he felt his consciousness begin to go on him, Laila’s violent shaking of his body suddenly made the nausea storm back to life.

“Ahh...”

Heeding his warning, Laila leaped all the way to the opposite wall. But as Urushihara slowly got to his feet, she thought she could see the light back in his eyes.

“.....I’m gonna go on deck and hurl.”

“Um, best of luck.”

“Oh, right. Laila, why was I tied to that bed even before the moon broke up?” he casually asked.

When the question reached Laila’s ears, she looked like she was witnessing the god of death himself.

“Underground in Satanas Arc. That medical bed. That was for me, right?” he continued.

“L-Lucifer, that...”

“Huh? Or, wait...”

Urushihara, blue in the face from seasickness, had heavy rings around his eyes as he weakly smiled.

“Did you forget, too?”

“.....”

Laila couldn’t answer.

Why couldn’t she?

“I guess everyone did, to some extent. I doubt we can count on Gabriel for much, either.”

Leaving the blank-faced, frozen Laila behind, Urushihara left the cabin. The bobbing corridor was long, narrow, and dark. With an unsteady gait, he kept his hand on the wall as he slowly pressed forward. His knees were aching. The heartburn was awful. A sour taste was at the bottom of his throat. His mouth was dry.

“Ah... Right. It was like this. Crap. And being *seasick* set it off... Wish I coulda remembered it in some cooler way.”

Fighting back the contents of his stomach, Urushihara slowly climbed the stairs of the ship. He ran into nobody along the way. This being a cargo vessel, the few other guests were relaxing on deck or in their rooms, it not being a long voyage.

After he’d dragged himself to the top and opened the door to the upper deck, his eyes—used to the dark interior—burned in the light.

“Wehh...”

Strong light was another catalyst for seasickness. Urushihara lumbered to the side of the boat, stuck his head over, and threw up in dazzling fashion.

“Hurrrhhhk...”

The assorted things falling into the sparkling waters below quickly flowed behind the ship. The breeze didn't feel that strong to him, but the tidal current and wind direction must've been favorable. They were running faster than he thought.

"Ahh... So bright..."

He was a bit calmer now, finally, but Urushihara's instincts told him that the *real* seasickness only began after his stomach was empty. Fighting back the depression, he looked up. The winds must've been different in the upper sky, because some faint clouds floated in the blue, almost like the sun was pushing them along with the craft.

"I can't stand how blue the sky is. And the white of the clouds. If Villa Rosa Sasazuka just had an air conditioner, it'd be great in the summer..."

Within his eyes, the blue sky transformed into the red hue of stormier times.

"But... Well, I remember how much better I felt then, too. Oh, man, I *hate* it when I recall bad old memories. Now I get it when people say they bury their face in their pillow and flail around in bed. You gotta be kidding me."

A single tear fell from his eye. And in the endlessly long life he had led, words that he never once recalled saying fell out of the corner of his mouth.

"I called them 'papa' and 'mama'? Hurrgh... *Ptoo!*"

Once he'd ejected the embarrassing memory with the rest of what was left inside him, Urushihara stared down at the sea surface and spat at it.

THE AUTHOR, THE AFTERWORD, AND YOU!

I think the manager at a part-time job is, to a lot of people, the first real grown-up you encounter in your life apart from parents and teachers. For many students taking jobs, I'd say the "manager" is the first person who gives you orders from above that you generally can't rebel against, unlike parents or teachers—and even worse, they usually don't even attempt to get on your good side. Seeing a manager working as the main person at a store or business, perhaps my parents thought to themselves, "Maybe this is what working at an office is like," or "Will it be like this for me when I get a job?" or "I want to/don't want to be like that."

To me, Wagahara, there are three "managers" in my life I'll never forget.

One was the manager at a big *izakaya* chain located in a busy neighborhood. Managers at chains like these have really gone through a gauntlet, some of them completely worn down by it, but this one still had his natural freshness and friendliness intact. Clearly, he had talent, head and shoulders above the rest. He was good at remembering the names of management executives and part-timers, and even when he had to work a kitchen and a 300-seat space two days in a row with a staff of just six people, he simply said:

"Okay, let's kick this track meet off!"

...and that was enough to motivate you to join him. You could say he was a natural-born con man along those lines.

The second one was the manager of a diner I worked at during college. "If you want a career, stay out of restaurants" was a favorite phrase of his; he constantly bitched about his pay and treatment. But strangely enough, he was always thorough in his work, good with customers, and had a great staff retention rate. Sometimes he'd be so exhausted that I'd find him lying upside down, asleep in the broom closet-sized changing room we had. I am thus pretty sure he really *did* hate his job, but he was definitely *suited* for the industry. Your

talents and your preferences really can exist in different dimensions, and this was my first case study in that.

The third is the manager of an *izakaya* that I'm still in touch with. He's an ex-rugby player with the most solid body I've ever seen on a man. The kind of man who can catch types A and B influenza without noticing; the type of man who can eat a roasted mackerel and leave absolutely nothing on the plate. In other words, a man with really weird superpowers.

The way he lives has really taught me that in the end, your body is the greatest asset you have in life. Mine could never be as robust as his, but another reason I put him in the top three most unforgettable managers is that we just get along so well. I honestly see myself being him in another twenty years.

This book is all about people working hard around their managers, a presence many people never forget their whole lives.

The Devil Is a Part-Timer! is now at Volume 18. I think we're starting to see a climax coming, but not even I know what that will look like until I'm done writing it. What kind of conclusion is awaiting us? Is it really good for a book's theme to be "The Manager at My Part-Time Job" when we're talking about the ending to the series? Only the author (and his readers) of the future will know!

Regardless, I'll see you in the next volume!

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